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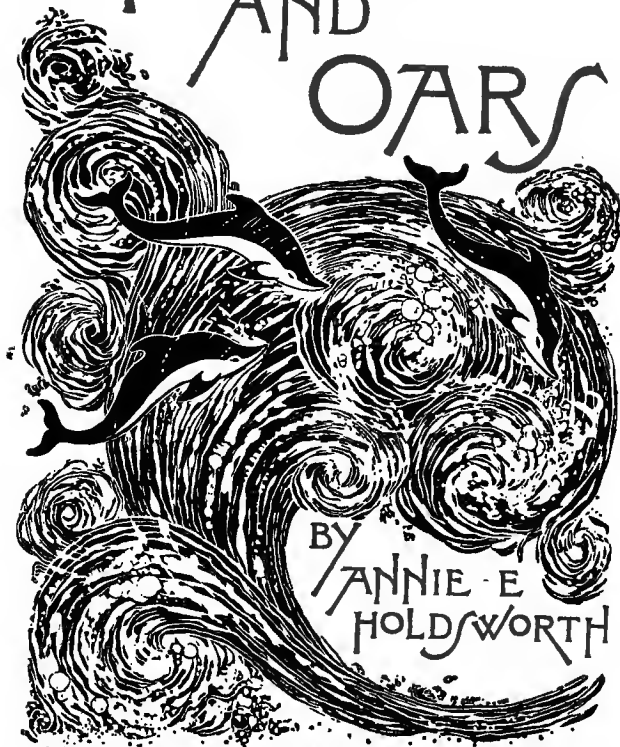
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SPINDLES AND OARS

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SPINDLES AND OARS



BY
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HOLDSWORTH



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To my Brother's Memory

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SPINDLES AND OARS

CHAPTER I

The Minister

A handful of fishermen's cottages, and a cluster of mills on the brae above them were, maybe, all that a stranger would see in Skyrle. And seeing these, I doubt he would get never a hint of its life, tossing like a shuttle from factory to shore, from green wave to dusty loom. It is not everywhere that you find the noise of the mills drowned by the roll of the sea ; or the simple ways of the fisher-folk mixing with the wheels and whirl of the factory ; but in Skyrle you can't get them parted. Sea and land, change and rest, birth and death, tears and laughing, spindles and oars make up the lives of the folk that live there.

But when our minister, Mr Grahame, came to the north it was terribly flattering to see how well the town pleased him. He had been

expecting only a fishing-village; and when he saw all the houses and all the kirks—Skyrle being one of those places that keep their religion in brick—and the harbour, and the common, he was very well pleased to find himself in Scotland. And a fine sight it was to see his happy face when he knew he had no appointments to make, and no week-night sermon to preach, and but one class to meet through the week.

‘Ah!’ said he to his lassie, Miss Isobel, ‘had I but known this, I would have asked for a Scotch Circuit when I was a young man. In you go to the manse, child. It will be three good years before we say farewell to it, please God!’

So they stepped through the gate close by the kirk; and though it was the gloaming, the lassie called out at the bonnie garden, with its bit of lawn, and old apple trees; and the elms beyond, where the crows built in the spring. But when she saw the house, she roared and laughed; though it was truly a fine manse, only low in the roof, and maybe not over bright for a young lassie. She danced into the room where Kirsty, the maid, had spread the supper, and looked into the chamber opening from it,

calling out to her father to come in and see the bed in the wall. But the minister did not heed her. He had not thought to stoop coming into the room, and so had knocked his head on the door beam. He sat down rubbing his brow; and when Kirsty would have clapped some sweet butter to it, he stopped her; saying, dry-like, it was a clever man that made an impression so soon as he entered on a new charge.

In the meantime Miss Isobel was running over the rooms crying out at all she saw, and laughing at Scotch ways. Kirsty did not like to hear the manse made a laughing-stock, but all at once the lassie burst into the room, and gave her a kiss in the English fashion.

The tea-pot had been sitting on the hob, and when the lassie spoke, Kirsty put it on the table and the two began their tea. But it was easy to be seen that they were English by the way they acted with the bannocks, eating them without butter and never a thought to the syrup, though Kirsty coughed and pushed it beside the minister's plate more than once. But I'm thinking English folk are surely not all right in their taste, for although the tea had been infused the best part of the hour, they took ill with it and called for fresh. This

was like to upset Kirsty again, but just then the minister asked what they called cookies in Scotland, and she was so flattered at knowing more about it than the minister, that she infused fresh tea and never a word at doing it. But from that day she held her head above most of the kirk members; and none ever forgot that it was Kirsty that told the minister what way they called cookies in Scotland. It was maybe this that made her so free afterwards in criticising the sermons; she felt that she had a right after she had given him the information about the cookies.

Well, this was on the night of the Friday, and by Sabbath forenoon there was not a kirk member but knew how the new minister was a widow man with the one lassie, and a wee terrier that they named Skye. And this being so, it was natural that Mr Grahame should be well liked in the town—Skyrle having a great name for the old maids in it. And there was not a member but knew too how the minister had gone into the kirk on the Saturday, and kneeling down in the aisle, had put up a prayer for a blessing on his work among the people he had not seen. But if you had not felt by his face that the minister was a man

of prayer, you would have told by his breeks that were shiny and worn at the knees, and good in all other places. And many a time Kirsty—she and David M'Naughten, the church officer, were courting—has seen the key in the vestry door, and seeking in for David, has been put about to find the minister at his prayers.

He was the sort of man that clapped at more than one sense from the pulpit; for, shut your eyes as you might, his tongue kept you from sleep through the sermon.

Man! what a voice the minister had! There was no sleep in the kirk that Sabbath; and even the rooks that gathered on the trees outside stopped their chatter to listen to the sermon.

The church was one of the oldest in Skyrle, and had been built by John Wesley himself. It was a quaint-like place with eight sides, by reason of which it got the name of 'the Totum Kirkie.'* But for all its age, it was bonnie with trees and its diamond-paned windows. And when you got inside you had a sight of the stained-glass window above the pulpit, through which the sun glinted on Sabbath mornings.

To be sure there was not much of John Wesley remaining in the kirk. But in the

* Teetotum Church.

vestry there was the old pulpit he had used ; and an old-fashioned clock that had ticked to his preaching. And there was a musty smell about the place that Geordie Mackay praised, calling it the odour of antiquity, though it was just the damp.

It was Geordie that first found out the human nature in Mr Grahame. And I won't say I didn't catch a sort of twinkle in the minister's eye, when, seeing that William Rafe—the lad that played the harmonium—was like to drop off to sleep, he gave the Book a thump that made more than one swallow their peppermint drop in a hurry, and sit up very stiff, blinking to show they were awake.

There's no doubt the minister enjoyed his joke, for I remember him telling David not to put away his little doggie from the vestry at the class. 'No, no, David,' said he ; 'Skye is a good Methodist though he is Scotch ; and I am glad to have one regular attendant at the class.' So the doggie came every Wednesday ; and afterwards would give his paw to any body at the door, for all the world like the minister shaking hands with the members.

Mr Grahame was a great man for dumb things, and had a canary that sat on his

shoulder, or ran after his pen as he wrote. And he had a parrot, too, that was a scandal to Kirsty; for though it sang psalms during the week, it used awful language on Sabbath when the kirk came out.

'A grand sermon and a grand man, yon,' said Geordie at the gate that first Sabbath after the sermon. 'A grand man, is he no', David?'

'I wouldna say he is no', said David, with his eye on his boots, watching for Kirsty to win into the manse.

'I'm thinking it's a guid change we have made fra the last man. He has a gift, the minister,' said Geordie.

'He was powerfu' hard on the cushions,' said Elspeth. 'We'll be needin' ithers gin he chastens them sae sair.'

'Ay, he has a gift, has he no', David?' Geordie went on.

'Mebbe so, mebbe no,' said David, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand; Kirsty having passed him with her head high, on account of Elspeth Mackay standing beside him. Elspeth was no kin to Geordie, though she bore the same name.

'I took vera weel wi' his gien' oot o' the

hymns,' said Elspeth. 'I can aye tell by that what spirit a man is of.'

'I ken better by his shirt-front,' said Widdy Rafe. 'Cleanliness is neist to Godliness, if no' before it.'

And indeed to see the widow you would have thought it was before it. And many a time William Rafe has wished that text out of print, his life being a burden to him with clean collars and the starch in his Sabbath shirt. But it was the town's talk that his mother said there was aye hope of a man's soul so long as his body was kept fair.

'He pit a saxpence i' the plate,' said David. 'I'm no' sure but I was expectin' a shilling fra the new minister.'

'Ay, he's mair Scotch nor English,' said Elspeth. 'Were you noticing the sprinkle o' snuff on his weskit, mem?'

Widdy Rafe didn't answer, not liking Elspeth to know her sight was not so good as it might be.

'Could you tell me wha wrote that fine rhyme fra Cowper that he quoted at the end?' she asked, to take Elspeth down, and being awful proud of her book learning.

'Na, mem,' said Elspeth, poor body; 'I dinna mind o't just the noo.'

'Weel, weel,' said Geordie; 'he's got awful big feet.'

'Eh, deary, deary! Do your hear him, David? the minister's gotten big feet,' Elspeth called.

'And why for no'?' said Widdy Rafe very short. 'A man wi' small feet never has muckle at ether end o' him.'

'And what about a woman?' said Geordie, very bold; for he knew well that Widdy Rafe had the biggest foot in Skyrle. But, however, she took no notice of the laddie's mischief.

'Weel, Elspeth, I'll haud hame wi' you,' she said; 'for my Wullie is to tak his diet at the manse the day.'

'At the manse? wi' the minister?' said Elspeth very slow; as was natural, thinking of William Rafe getting his dinner with the minister.

'Ay,' said the widdy, as if she was not caring to be proud about it. 'He was bidden yestreen after helping Kirsty unpack the kists. The manse will be a sicht the day wi' all the braw things intil it. I doot he'll no' get his meat for looking at them.'

'There's naething i' the manse bonnier than the minister's lassie,' said Geordie.

But he got fine and red when Widdy Rafe turned on him.

'Ca canny, laddie, and tak tent o' your steps, for be a man's feet great or sma' they're swift to follow where a lassie leads.'

Surely that was a hard thing to say to a young lad that was happy, not knowing the ways of womenfolk.

Just then the manse gate opened, and out came the little doggie shaking his hair, and delighted to be going out; and Miss Isobel after him, a slip of a lassie with big shining eyes, and yellow hair tumbled about her like the doggie's. They had surely forgotten it was the Sabbath; or, maybe, being English, they didn't rightly know to keep the day; but, I can tell you, the sight of the young things as bright and gladsome as though it was a Monday gave Widdy Rafe such a shock that she never forgot it. To think of the minister's daughter setting an example to the town, with her eyes and hair and feet dancing on the Sabbath, and the doggie's with her!

The lassie flashed past us and through the

gate before a word could be said ; and then out came the minister. How noble he was, with his white hair and grand head, his kindly eyes, and his smile that was like a bow from royalty ! And how proud Elspeth was when he took a kiss from her wee Eppie and bade her be a good girl, the while he sought in his pocket for a sweetie for her. Elspeth was just delighted, and ceased envying William Rafe, who stood by wearing gloves and feeling as if he was all hands.

He was a nice lad, William, not over bold ; and it seemed a great thing for him to be walking out with Mr Grahame, explaining church matters to him. And, indeed, he knew more about the little church John Wesley had built than any other body in Skyrle. He led the minister out by the Abbey burying-ground to show him where the table monument was on which John Wesley had stood to preach his first sermon in the town. And delighted was Mr Grahame to hear how Wesley had stopped the mouth of the parish minister who was for holding him from preaching in his parish.

‘No, no,’ said Wesley ; ‘~~day~~ parish is that of my Master, and is anywhere under the blue skies where there is a hungry soul de-

siring the bread of life. Go you back to your manse and take another sleep in your arm-chair by the fire.' At which the folk were very well pleased; it being known that the parish minister thought more of keeping himself warm in this life than of keeping his flock from being too warm in the next.

He could make no answer, the people being all for hearing the strange English preacher; and he had to leave him to his sermon, after John Wesley had challenged him to a debate in John Gouck's barn the morrow's morn. The which they had; but the parish minister lost his hold on doctrine, and couldn't argue with Wesley, the wee man being as nimble with his tongue as with his legs.

They didn't stop long in the Abbey, Miss Isobel being fain to have a sight of the sea; so William led them across the green and along Ponderlaw till they got out by the brae-heads. And there was the sea before them as blue as ever 'tis seen, and they standing by the yellow field where the corn was waiting for the sickle. The minister lifted his hat, and his lips moved; but Miss Isobel just looked at William with the tears standing in her eyes, as you have seen the dew spread on the blue corncockles in harvest.

'Do you not take well with it, Miss Grahame?' said William, speaking English very grand.

'It is not that,' said Miss Isobel, her voice like the wind sighing through the corn; 'but it is so beautiful. I never thought there was anything so lovely.'

'Ay, ay, it's well enough,' said William.

And indeed it might have been worse. Out of the blue waves rose up the white pillar of the Bell Lighthouse like an angel guarding the coast; and the sunshine on it gave it wings shining like the lids of Kirsty's saucepans. South of the harbour you could see a flash of gold from the Eyelot sands, and the bonnie purple hills at the river mouth beyond. The grey stones of the harbour wall I liked for the colour that led the eye to the dark rocks on the shore and the red cliffs rising above them. It was no wonder that the red and the blue, the silver and the gold, and the white clouds like a lifted veil above it all, should have made the lassie greet. But the minister finished his prayer, and William looked round at her as if he thought little of the landscape beside Miss Isobel.

If Geordie Mackay, who is a bit of a poet, had been there, he'd have said the slim girlie

standing on the edge of the brae was like the spirit of the place; for her gold hair and red cheeks, blue eyes and white skin, had all the colours that were in the picture before them.

But though William felt the resemblance he couldn't have put it into words; but his breast thumped like John Gouck's drum at the volunteers' drill, and for the first time in his life he saw a lassie with the eyes of his heart. And this made him stand very foolish-like, wishing sore he hadn't put on the gloves that took the manhood out of him. And Kirsty told me afterwards how Miss Isobel won home and laughed with the doggie Skye about the Scotchman that hadn't any eye for beauty.

CHAPTER II

Jean's Lad

Kirsty at the manse, always said that Jean had no right to burden herself with Nancy Mull-holland's bairn. A young thing like her, she was fifteen just, wasn't the right sort of mother for a week-old baby. But eh, you never can tell when the mother grows in a lassie. I have seen the girlies with their dolls, nursing them and holding the wooden heads close to their innocent little bosoms, till I have been like to greet. And Jean was that sort of lassie always. Before she was ten there wasn't a woman in Skyrle but was glad to have her mind the bairns; all, I should say, but Kirsty, who did not think a woman could be motherly till she was a mother; and who was for having nature go in harness, and would fain have had the reins in her own hands.

But I never took well with such like notions.

Marriages may or may not be made in heaven ; but I am right sure mothers are made there whenever a woman child is born. And so I told Kirsty ; for though a woman has her hands full of bairns she's no more a mother than many a childless creature whose heart is ready to take in every little helpless bairn that comes into the world. And Jean Wishart was one of that sort. You could tell it by the way she took Nancy Mullholland's babe from its mother and held it with her cheek bent down against the little red face.

'The wee thingie !' she said, crying and laughing at once. 'She's no' to go to the poor's house. Rest your mind, Nancy ; she shall be my own bairn ; and I'll be a mither to her sae long as God spares me.'

Jean was tall and womanly, though she was a young thing ; and she had lived so long by herself that she was douce like and sensible beyond her years ; and none grumbled at her taking the bairn home to do for it but Kirsty ; and I know what made Kirsty talk that way. If a woman is ever angered at another, it's when she sees that other doing the duty that she ought to do herself. And Kirsty was like to be sharp on Jean ; for she was

own aunt to Nancy, and should have taken the bairn home herself.

She saw her duty clear, and it made her grudging-like to Jean when she met the lassie, with her face all red and proud, in Anderson's buying a long gown to the bairn instead of a new hat to herself. And it did more, for it kept her from the kirk the Sabbath the babe was baptised; though she put it down spasms from eating fine bread at Elspeth Mackay's the night before. And sorry I was for Kirsty to have missed seeing the baptism, for I'm sure a prettier sight hadn't been in the kirk since it was built a hundred years ago.

Mr Grahame gave out the hymn, and the church officer, Kirsty's David, rose and opened the vestry door. Miss Isobel, the minister's little daughter, who thought a sight of Jean, had slipped out of the manse pew and gone round to the vestry before that; and when David opened the door, out she came with her eyes all shining and excited, walking beside Jean, who carried Nancy Mullholland's bairn.

When Mr Grahame walked down the pulpit steps and stood with his white hair before the two young things—for Miss Isobel was younger than Jean—many a one sobbed aloud, it was

so pitiful to see the two lassies and the little motherless bairn waiting for the old man's blessing.

William Rafe was new to the organ then; and being always tender, his eyes got so dim he lost his place, and would have broken down, only Geordie Mackay took up the hymn and carried it on to the end. Miss Isobel stood with her cheeks very red looking up at the minister. But Jean had a kind of hush on her face and while she held the baby her eyes stared straight up over the pulpit at the window with the stained glass. It was Miss Isobel who gave the name 'Nannie' very loud, so that all could hear; and the minister lifted the little thing in his arms in the English fashion, and put his hand on her. Then he gave her back to Jean; and as she took her the sun struck through the window and laid a slant of gold across the baby's forehead. It was Geordie Mackay who noticed this, and he told Kirsty afterwards it was a token for good. But, eh deary me! who could believe that when the baby got up and was just the naughtiest slip of a lassie that ever wore a woman out?—but I'm not to tell of that yet.

Kirsty always held to it that what followed

was a judgment on Jean for rushing into the duties of a mother before she was called ; and, indeed, it seemed a strange providence that it was that very Sabbath Willie Murgatroyd came walking into Skyrle bent on offering her marriage. But I often think the ways of Providence are like a rainbow, for we cannot see them unless the sun is shining ; and many a time they are only half-drawn on the clouds, with the end too far off for our sight to follow it.

Willie and Jean had courted since the time they were at school together ; but he had been staying in the south seeking work, and so he had never heard a word of Nancy Mullholland's death, and the way Jean had taken in the bairn. He went along the High Street, nodding bashful-like to one and another as he passed, and he turned down Seagate to the house by the shore where she stayed. He was so full of what he had to say to her that it gave him a turn when, near by the railings, Kirsty plucked at his coat-tail.

She was not very well pleased at having missed the baptism that made the talk of the town, and she had led David out by the shore to hear what she could from Jean herself.

When she set eyes on Willie she had as much as she could do to keep her tongue from the subject; but she knew he was Jean's lad, and she was not minded to let him see that David knew more of the matter than herself.

'Aweel, Wullie, and are you to call for Jean the day?' she asked him.

'Ou ay,' said Willie sheepish-like, turning his face away, for he felt as if everybody in Skyrle could read his errand on it.

'Weel, Wullie, I'm doubting you'll no tak weel wi' what Jean has to tell you,' Kirsty said, edging along the subject as you'll see a crab edge along the waves when the tide's coming in.

'And why for no?' said Willie very quick. 'Is she to say me nay?' Then he got awful red, for he had told Kirsty all.

'I doubt she'll no be saying you nay, nor ony ither man,' Kirsty said. 'She'll be unco fain of a lad, I'm thinking.'

'Hoots, wumman!' David took her up short, like the minister stamping his foot at the notable parts of his discourse. 'Gae you ben the hoose, Wullie, and Jean will tell you the hail maitter better than Kirsty wha kens naught about it.'

David's Sabbath dinner had surely made a man of him ; but, however, Kirsty feeling the edge of truth in what he said, turned on him with her tongue, and Willie left them to it and went into the house to Jean. The sight of the baby on her knee made him forget his errand ; but Jean called him in, and soon he knew how she had promised to rear Nancy's bairn.

There's nothing can put a man second in a woman's heart so easy as a baby can. The tender wee thing pulls at her love stronger than a man has power for ; and it angered Willie to see that Jean, who before this had never had an eye for aught but himself, couldn't listen to him for noticing the bairn.

'What was't you were saying, Willie?' she would ask absent-like, and not minding the answer, go on nodding and smiling down at the child on her knee. And when he was fain to tell her of his plans : 'See how the wee handie failds ower my finger,' said she, caring nothing at all about his arrangements.

He couldn't get her to listen to him for the child, and his heart got hotter and hotter against it. But he kept his rage in, and went on with his story, how he would soon be away to Australia, and would she wed at once and

go over the sea with him. And then she did look up, with a great light shining on her face that it made him bashful to see. 'Surely, Willie,' she said earnestlike, as though she would never have thought of doing aught else.

He would have taken her hand then, but the baby had fallen asleep holding her finger, and she would not let him disturb it.

'Jean, put that bairn down,' he cried. 'I need you, not the bairn, and I canna have even a kiss for you holding it. I doubt I'm jealous, lassie, for I canna bear to see you giving mair thought to the child than to me.'

'No, no, you mustna talk that gait, Willie,' she said, smiling. 'I think you should love wee Nannie too, for by-and-by she will belong to us baith.'

Jean never told what he said to her after that, but they must have been hard words, for he was angered. And when Kirsty came into the room an hour later, he had gone, and Jean was standing with a white, white face, and her arms locked about the bairn.

She had seemed but a lassie before, but Kirsty sat down suddenly in a tremble when she saw the change in her. She was a woman

all at once, and her face was still and cold, like the face of the sea before the storm breaks through it. At first Kirsty dared not ask her how she had settled with her lad, but she was bent on knowing. So she moved forward and felt the stuff of the bairn's gown—it was fine muslins and fit for a child of the manse—saying: 'Ay, lassie, you'll no be carin' to spend sae muckle on Nancy's bairn when you hae your ain to cleed. Wullie is a close lad. He'll maybe grudge his siller efter the merriage.'

Then Jean turned to her with her mouth all quivering, and said she, 'You mustna call Willie's name to me again, Kirsty. We are no' to be merried, and, if you please, I'd like very well to be my lane just now.'

Kirsty is not one that you can quiet with a word, her tongue being like a bunch of nettles, but it made her dumb to see the lassie standing there so white and awful. She had her arms round the child as though she would never let her go, and Kirsty saw as clear as Lunan water what had happened. She held her tongue till she got to the bench where David sat smoking his Sabbath pipe, although she was like to burst with pride at being the

first to know Jean had quarrelled with her lad. But as soon as she came up to David she began. And for many days after there was never a body in Skyrle could get a word out of David M'Naughten.

CHAPTER III

When Andrew Won Back To Lizbeth

'Andra Cargill is awa' wi' Bella Forsyth,' David remarked to Kirsty.

Kirsty was in the manse kitchen baking scones, and she threw her hands above her head till the flour came down on her like to snow in the fall.

'Awa' wi' Bella Forsyth!' she cried.

'Ou ay,' said David very douce.

'Andra Cargill?' she asked him.

'Ou ay,' said David again.

'Man, are you for sayin' Andra's left his lawful wife, Lizbeth, for a bold hizzy like Bella?'

She looked at him with razors in her eye, but David studied his own comfort and kept his glance on the floor while he answered her.

'I didna' juist say sae,' he said, 'but, however, he's awa' wi' her.'

Kirsty sat herself very sudden on a creepie stool, and flung her apron over her head, rocking and calling:—‘An’ him a kirk member, eh, dearie, dearie! Likely Lizbeth winna pay for mair than ane sitting i’ the kirk the noo! ’Twill be an awfu’ blow tae the meenister, eh, dearie, dearie!’

She wasn’t greeting, but she was maybe wishing that David might think it; and indeed there is nothing so like to make a man play the fool as the sight of a woman in tears—that is to say if she isn’t married to him.

But David had not been married ten years to his wife (poor decent body, she was scarce cold in the Abbey yard before he went courting to Kirsty!) without getting a knowledge of woman’s ways to help him through life. He sat very still with his eyes on the floor the while Kirsty sobbed, swaying herself, and thinking that the news would make an awful amazement in the kirk on Sabbath first.

David broke the silence at last.

‘I wadna be sayin’ thae scones are no’ burnin’.’

Before the words were from his lips the apron was from Kirsty’s head, and she was on her knees before the stove with a scone

in each hand beating the burn from the edges. 'Theer's naething like to a man for makkin' wark;' she said, when she had gained her breath. 'Gin you canna say mair aboot the maitter you'll maybe no' sit like a gowk burnin' Miss Isobel's scones.'

David was a wiser man than to make answer to a scolding woman.

'The meenister wull maybe be breakin' the tidin's tae Lizbeth;' he remarked.

'Man! dae you tell me Lizbeth disna ken the haill circumstances?' Kirsty cried.

'I wadna say that she does, and I wadna say that she doesna,' David replied to her.

In less than an hour Kirsty's scones were all fired; the manse kitchen was fair for the day; and Kirsty, dressed in her Sabbath gown, and carrying her Sabbath kerchief, (for well she knew she would have a need of it!) was stepping out to Easthaven where Lizbeth Cargill stayed among the other fisher-folk. Kirsty's face was set in importance the while she travelled the road between Skyrle and Easthaven. And indeed if she had not had the scandal to make her of consequence, her Sabbath clothes on the week-day would have given dignity to her appearance. And the

kerchief she bore set her mouth as for a funeral.

It was an easy thing to see that more than ordinary was causing tongues to wag in the haven that morning. Down the long street that makes the village, the fishwives at their tubs were calling one to another, tossing Andra's name and Bella's across the reek of the haddies. The fishers stood in knots here and there with their hands in their pockets saying little, though to Kirsty it seemed that even the smoke from their pipes smirched the names of Lizbeth, and Andra' and Bella.

She kept her ears open but she passed between the two lines of houses with her eyes set straight as though she saw nothing. She had a duty before her, and she could not wait to gossip with the neighbours lest the news should get to Lizbeth's house ere she carried it. And as she went her way, she took note that the nigher she drew to Lizbeth the more quiet were the tongues, until she couldn't have said that anything extraordinary had occurred in the haven. But when she had a sight of Andrew Cargill's house—it stood the last on the brae—she was like to let her kerchief drop with her delight at

seeing Lizbeth sitting beside her door baiting Andrew's lines, for this told Kirsty that Lizbeth was ignorant that Andrew had proved himself unfaithful to her, and a scandal to all in the haven.

'Lizbeth, Lizbeth, ma puir dearie, I bring you sair tidin's,' said she, holding her kerchief to the one eye while she looked at her with the other.

Lizbeth lifted her head, and Kirsty saw that on her face which told her the woman knew her ill news. It was truly disappointing to her that Lizbeth was not to have the shock from her lips, but she scarce had the time to think of that. She dropped the kerchief, and her blood took a chill when she saw the terrible aspect of Lizbeth.

'Lizbeth, Lizbeth!' said she trembling, and with true pity in her heart.

'Guid day tae ye, Kirsty,' said Lizbeth in a civil voice.

'I wis thinkin' I'd win oot tae inquire hoo you're keepin,' said Kirsty.

'I'm obleeged tae ye, I'm keepin' fine,' Lizbeth answered in a voice like a barred gate.

'It's pooerfu' warm the day,' said Kirsty, feeling the drops on her brow.

‘Ay, it is that,’ said Lizbeth, ‘but seasonable.’

Kirsty’s temper rose. It wasn’t the treatment she would have expected from one kirk member to another, but she wouldn’t be beaten by the unnatural body.

‘An’ hoo’s Andra’ keepin’? He wasna at the kirk Sabbath past;’ said she. .

‘Andra’s fine, I thank ye, Kirsty. An’ hoo’s a’ wi’ ye at the Manse? Miss Isobel, an’ the meenister, an’ the wee doggie?’

And now there were spikes on the gate that warned Kirsty it would be ill venturing farther. She lifted her kerchief from the road, saying she was to call for a friend at the Mains and might not put off the time talking; and then she took the road back to Skyrle, promising David something for the fool’s errand he had given her that day.

And it was noticeable afterwards that Kirsty had a deal to say of the on-Christian spirit Lizbeth Cargill showed in bearing the burden a just Providence had laid upon her.

But when Lizbeth had ended the baiting of the lines, she bore them down the brae and laid them in Andrew’s boat, as she had been used to do these ten years.

Pete Cargill, Andrew's brother, was in the boat emptying the water from her. He watched Lizbeth a while ; then said he—for he had more than a man's foolishness, the creature!—‘Dae ye no ken, Lizbeth?’

‘Ay,’ said she, very short, ‘ill tidin’s is weel shod—’

‘I’m dootin’ he’s been led awa, Andra—’

‘Theer’s sma’ doot o’ that. But maybe you’ll tak his lines while he wins back.’

‘Ou, ay, I’ll dae that. But he’ll no win back.’

‘He’ll win back,’ said Lizbeth.

She turned herself and climbed the brae ; her feet steady as when she had climbed it on her wedding-morn, ten years ago. Her limbs didn’t tremble, even although she felt that the laddies on the shore were gazing after her and talking of Andrew ; even although she could tell that the other fisher-wives on the brae were gazing at her and talking of Bella Forsyth’s bonnie face.

Her own face was white as could be, but she held her head high, and stepped past them all, going to her house. When she opened the door the sight of Andrew’s gear made her catch her breath, and her lips were the colour of the peat-ash on the hearth. But she

straightened herself and sought dry clothes for Andrew, his hose and his shoon; and set his pipe beside his chair in the ingle.

And when all was ended she sat her down and gazed at his empty chair. She didn't moan, neither weep, nor did she other than just gaze at the ingle where Andrew was not. But the look on her face was the look of the dead.

* * * * *

For more than a twelvemonth there was no word of Andrew and Bella, and the want of news wrought a terrible change on Lizbeth. She was a proud woman, and a silent, and none of the fishers dared approach her to call Andrew Cargil's name in her presence. Even Mr Grahame who visited her was rendered dumb by Lizbeth's hardness and silence. Kirsty had it to say that when he told Lizbeth 'twas God's will that laid such a burden on her she broke her silence, and looking him straight in the eye, said she:—'I'm dootin' the flesh an' the deil's had mair hands i' this business than the A'michty.'

'You're right, Mrs Cargill, you're right;' said the minister very grave. But I couldn't altogether comprehend the twinkle that sat

in his eye when he related the story afterward.

And yet it was easy to see the poor body was not content to bide alone, for she fell away from being a comely woman, and was just a handful of bones. She kept herself to herself, and when her work was done she travelled along the brae looking out to sea as though she expected Andrew to win back that way to her.

And there was talk among the folk that Andrew's chair stood in the ingle, and Andrew's clothes were aye waiting for him. And each morn Lizbeth baited the lines and mended the nets, and gathered buckies, for all the world as if Andrew hadn't forsaken her for a strange woman.

It was when the year was at the spring that there was talk of Andrew and Bella, that they had come back and were staying at a lone house down the Cadgers Road.

How the talk got to Lizbeth's ears none might tell save Pete; but there was no doubt it had taken hold of her. A kind of craving was in her eye, and her white face wore two patches of red till she had the appearance of a woman fevered.

And one forenoon when the fishers and their wives were down at the shore she put on her

Sabbath clothes, and slipped from the haven none seeing, and took her road out by Seaton and down where the Cadgers Road strikes hands with the highway.

It was a bonnie day—one of those days of the young year that make me think of wee ducklings, so soft and warm and yellow and eager with stirring life are they. Each hour of this day that saw Lizbeth travel to lead Andrew home was glinting with blue and gold and fine young greens.

The Cadgers Road was not over easy to feet that wearied for the finish of their journey, but it was flaming with yellow gorse and golden broom and the budding willow that the bairns pluck for Palm Sabbath. And above the yellow was a heaven blue as Andrew's eye, and never a cloud crossing it.

Surely it was a promise of good to Lizbeth! It seemed to the poor body that the spring had come to her life; and she travelled on in that hope, saying over to herself the words she would speak to win Andrew back to her. But when she came in sight of the cottage she was seeking, the heart in her struggled so sorely that she was fain to lean against the trunk of one of the pines. She could not move

a yard, but her eye sprang out to the house where Dave stayed. And then she heard a sound of singing, and there was Bella in the door with a babe laughing and crowing in her arms. And, seeing her, Lizbeth's heart leaped in her with a terrible bitter cry.

It was the bitterness of death that took hold upon her then—the bitterness of her long vain hoping, and the bitterness of the hours she had wrestled on her knees for the bairn that had been denied to her.

She could not keep her eyes from the child and its mother, the two young things that had none but Dave to cherish them; and her heart failed her for the deed she had come to do. She leaned trembling against the pine, her weight crushing the freshly-budding leaves about her.

And while she waited Andrew himself drew nigh the house, and seeing the child, he went running and calling to it. And the babe held out his arms to his father, while Bella ceased her singing to laugh with the two. Lizbeth could not tell what time she bided watching; neither the hours that she fought with her love and bitterness. But the light was off the day when she took the road back to the haven,

bearing with her the words she had not spoken to Andrew. And the light was off her face, that was the face of an old woman; and her limbs tottered under her with the frailty of fourscore years. And all along the rough way of the Cadgers Road the words beat on her heart like a shower of biting hail—‘Oh my God, gin I had borne a babe tae him! gin I had borne a babe tae him!’

* * * * *

All night the storm swept over the brae; and the sound of the sea roaring among the rocks kept the sleep from the eye of many a fisher’s wife.

Lizbeth rose from her bed, and lighted the lamp and set it in the window. ‘Andra wull ken the licht an’ mak’ for the bar,’ she said to herself. But she could not lie in her bed with the wail of the storm about her ears; and she rose again and stirred the peat to a flame; and sat her down by the hearth, with her eye on Andrew’s chair. ‘He canna win oot tae the Cadgers Road the nicht,’ she was thinking; ‘maybe he wull come ben seein’ the licht.’

His clothes were always ready for him, and she lifted the hose and held them to the flames, warming them.

'An' maybe he's no i' the boatie ava,' she thought. 'Maybe he didna win oot wi' the lave o' them, an' is sleepin' soond i' his bed.'

But when the morn came in, still, and grey, and dumb, a terrible silence struck on Lizbeth sitting on the hearth. She had no strength to rise; all the life had gone from her.

She hearkened to the folk running down the brae to the shore; she heard them calling one to the other, but she did not move till the sound of feet falling more heavily than usual beat like flails on her heart. Then she rose up, and what a look was on her face!

'Tis Andra winnin' back,' she said. And she lifted the sneck, and threw the door wide, and found Pete dumb before her.

'Ay, 'tis Andra,' said he. 'Wull we bring him in by, or tak' him oot tae Bella?'

Her eye had gone beyond Pete to the drowned man they were bearing up from the brae.

'You wull bear him ben,' she said.

'The boat's bottom up, I doot; 'tis an awfu' like loss,' said Pete. 'He cam' in wi' the tide, but I doot we'll no' get the boat.'

Lizbeth made no answer, and the men bearing Andrew came in and laid him down

on the bed, the while the women-folk beat their breasts and tore their hair, and made a heap to do, wailing. Then Lizbeth bade them leave her and she locked the door, and shut herself in with the dead.

The clothes Andrew needed were waiting for him, and she dressed him with a terrible pride that he had come back to her, and it was she making him ready for his grave.

She waited beside him. She could not be content without the sight of him once more in his own house. And it was a long hour before the thought took a hold of her that Andrew would ne'er come back to her again. The night fell on a woman in the grip of a dumb agony. The fire was but a handful of ashes. The chamber was cold with the presence of the dead. Against the window the rain beat like fingers tapping, and borne on the wind she heard the wailing of a babe. The cry stirred the life in her and kindled it. She stumbled to the door and lifted the sneck, and while the wind entering was like to throw her down, Bella slipped past her and into the house.

'Lat me in, lat me in ooten the storm,' she sobbed.

Lizbeth shut the door, and sought a candle, and made a light.

Bella stood with the bairn in her arms, her eyes wide with fright.

'The storm's juist awfu,' she said, greeting, 'an' I dauredna bide.'

'And what gars ye come ben to me?' Lizbeth asked her fierce-like.

'Twas Pete—he telled me—an' I wanted in beside Andra'. Oh, Lizbeth, is't him lying theer? Oh, Lizbeth, wull I look at him?'

'Ay, surely, ma woman, 'tis meet you suld gaze on the wark o' your hands.'

'Na, na,' Bella sobbed, 'it's no Andra'—I canna look.'

'Tis Andra' wha's gien his life for the sin o' his soul,' said Lizbeth, terrible stern. 'Gie me the bairn. The deid'll fricht his young e'e.'

She lifted the bairn from Bella's arms and pointed her to the bed, but Bella greeted the more.

'Na, na, I daurna gaze on him. Thon man's no' Andra'. Eh, but a braw man's Andra', an' the wean favours him. Saw you e'er a bonnier bairn, Lizbeth?'

Lizbeth would have bidden her quit the

house for a shameless woman, but the babe in her arms stayed her. His wee hands were plucking at her neck, and the feel of bairn's fingers woke the mother in her. She turned from Bella, and made up the fire, and warmed some milk for the child; and while she was feeding him, Bella sat down in Andrew's chair, and spread her hands to the flames. A great cry broke from Lizbeth, but she hushed it, seeing the child was falling on slumber. She could not find words to bid Bella rise from the seat that had been empty so long, and her silence allowed what her heart would have forbidden. She was trembling greatly, her pride and wrongs melting like snow at the touch of the wee, warm, fingers. She could not drive the bairn forth into the storm.

Bella folded her plaid about her, and slumbered like a weary bairn; and, seeing her young face with the tears upon it, the hardness wore away from Lizbeth's thoughts. She bowed her eyes on the babe, and Bella's words came back to her: 'The bairn favours his feyther;' and she studied each feature of him to find out if 'twas the truth. Then she bore him to Andrew's side, and matched the living face with the dead man's. And indeed

it was a pitiful thing to see death matching sleep, and the slumbering babe, the wee image of the dead. And at the sight of it there was a terrible bitter cry in Lizbeth's heart.

She sat down where the light might fall on Andrew, and while Bella and the wean slumbered, her eyes did not move from the dead face. It was like to marble carved against the boardings of the couch ; and she gazed and gazed until a change passed on it, and 'twas the face she had loved ten years ago, young and ruddy, with blue eyes and laughing mouth.

The candle burnt low, and the flames died from the peat, but Lizbeth's heart waked all the weary night. The babe lay heavy in her arms, keeping her warm, and taking her thoughts from Andrew. She could not mind of the dead for the living babe at her heart.

And when the day broke Bella opened her eyes, and rose, and stood beside her.

'Gie me the bairn, an' lat me awa' ere the folk come in aboot.'

Like one dazed, Lizbeth raised the child, and he wakened with the movement, and lifted his hands cooing and laughing. Lizbeth could but gaze on him and tell herself she was dreaming. It was the face she had seen through

the night; Andrew's face, ruddy and young, with blue eyes and laughing mouth.

'Gie me the bairn and lat me awa',' Bella cried to her.

But Lizbeth tightened her arms round him, while the tears ran down her face.

'Na, na, 'tis Andra himsel' won back tae me.'

* * * *

And to this day Kirsty spreads an awful scandal of the un-Christian want of respect for Andrew's memory Lizbeth showed when she made a home for Bella and her babe.

CHAPTER IV

The Gates of Death

The minister was well thought of in Skyrle, and the town ministers came about the manse, and talked one with the other of his fine spirit and nobility. He had a hearty cheery way; and though it was a burial, you felt the gladsomer to see him come into the room with his hat off and the pity deep in his eyes. He was a fine preacher too, and there was never a diet of worship but some one would stop and say to David, 'Man! what a grand sermon we hae gotten the day!' And when David made no answer being too proud to show his pride in the minister, likely as not you would hear the parrot in the manse screaming and using profane language at the doggie, Skye. And many wondered at a good man like the minister keeping the ill-spoken bird.

When Mr Grahame had been eighteen months

in Skyrle he made William Rafe circuit steward, so giving offence to Kirsty, who would have had David put into the office, and not a young lad like William.

‘You canna pick muckle meat oot of a half-grown buckie,’* said she; and she went near angering Miss Isobel with her tongue grating on Rafe’s name the long day through.

It wasn’t likely the lassie thought William was young for the office when he was ten years older than herself, and quite a man with his moustache well grown and a hundred hands under him in his own mill. And Kirsty had no call to think the minister did not know what he was doing, For all his kindness Mr Grahame was a stern man and wouldn’t be turned from doing his duty by any matter whatever, and by this time all Skyrle knew him for a man that did the right, laying bare his life to the world, and making no profession he couldn’t act up to. But Providence surely had a hand in making William Rafe steward the very year that Mr Grahame was taken ill; for I cannot tell what the manse folk would have done if Jamie Murphy—who had as much kindness in him as a smoked haddock—had been in office.

* Shell-fish.

It was Communion Sabbath in Skyrle ; and when the minister rose to his sermon that day the members ceased counting the new communicants to marvel at his face. It was white and shining with a kind of inward light that made a hush in the church. None who saw him then will ever forget it, nor the beautiful look of him, nor his solemn loving words that touched the heart of the hardest. And when he stood by the table, all held their breath, for it was as if he knew he was ministering to his people that day for the last time. And the very next Sabbath as he was reading the hymn, he was taken as for death.

William Rafe looking at Miss Isobel saw her face change while the minister was giving out the verse:—

‘ Sometimes a light surprises
The Christian while he sings ;
It is the Lord who rises
With healing in His wings.’

He stopped.

Then Miss Isobel was out of the pew and round to the vestry, for the hand of the Lord had touched him.

They carried him into the manse, and Geordie Mackay gave out a hymn and read a psalm ;

and then William Rafe came back with a white face, and said the doctor was at the manse, and he had no hope of the minister's life.

When the kirk was out you could tell what had happened by the people going on tiptoe on the gravel under the manse windows, and not talking till they were well away from the house.

'The blinds are no' drawn,' said Elspeth, softly, peeping back over her shoulder.

'Toots! he's no awa' yet,' said Geordie. 'Ay, he was a grand man. Skyrle will no' see his like again.'

'I kenned fine his time had come,' said Widdy Rafe. 'When he made my Wullie steward he had putten the tap-stane to his work.'

'The tap-stane was putten at the Communion last Sabbath,' said Geordie. 'Saw you ever such a light on any face?'

'It was wonderfu',' said Elspeth, greeting. 'And aye he had a sweetie in his poke for my wee maid Eppie.'

'He was vera weel likit,' said David, 'and threw a hail shilling in the plate Sabbath past. Ay, he maun hae kenned it was his lest.'

'Eh, but the bairns wull miss him,' sobbed Elspeth.

'And wha wull the Conference be sending for Sabbath first?' asked Geordie.

'Likely the President himsel' for the funeral sermon,' said the Widdy. 'Are the mournings for the kirk ready, David?'

'Ay! they're aye ready. Happen the burial wull be Saturday first. I could hae wished it on the Friday,' said David, thinking of the cleaning of the kirk.

'It wasna for naethin' my Wullie led him oot by the graves the first Sabbath he spent i' Skyrle. Ay, and the minister said to him, "A pleasant spot; a man may sleep sweetly here." Ay, he did that,' Widdy Rafe said.

'I'm thinking o' the lassie,' said Elspeth, still greeting. 'The puir lambie! How is she bearing, do you ken, David?'

'Nane sae ill. She had a haud o' the minister's hand an wadna gang fra the room for a' the doctor.'

'The puir lambie! And she has na kin ava, and too young-like for a man of her ain;' said Elspeth.

Widdy Rafe put up her chin, and hastened on.

It seemed as if all in the town but Miss

Isobel thought the minister was to die ; but she would hear no word of it ; and when the Free Kirk minister called at the manse and put up a prayer for the bereaved orphan, she stopped her ears, and went out till he had concluded.

William Rafe found her greeting afterwards ; and sent Elspeth Mackay to hearten her. But when Elspeth came in and saw the minister, and the doggie lying beside the bed, she just turned and cast her arms round Miss Isobel.

‘Oh, my puir dearie!’ she cried. ‘Oh, my puir dearie! I ken fine how it is wi’ him. He’ll sune be awa’. He’s taen for the deid. Oh, my puir wee lambie!’

But Miss Isobel loosed her arms, and put Elspeth outside the door, an awful look on her young face. And all night long and for days after she and the doggie were alone beside the minister.

And it was so for many a day ; Kirsty sitting greeting with her apron over her head, and the poultices burning on the kitchen range. But the lassie shed never a tear, and did everything for the minister with her own hands. And seeing her strong and brave and cheery, William came to understand that she was a

woman, self-forgetful and ready for whatever was wanted of her. He was a great comfort at the manse, was William, being tender as a woman at nursing; and oft he sat with the minister while the lassie rested. And so she grew to lean on him, and maybe to love him as well; but that we didn't know for many a long day.

It was beautiful as the days went by to see how patient and bright the minister was; though his sickness was sore upon him, and he hadn't an hour's ease from pain. He had preached many a grand sermon in the kirk; but the finest of all was this he preached on his sick bed, and it was heard by everybody in Skyrle. Ay, his voice reached to every house; and all knew how he lay smiling, and waiting God's will without a murmur while his poor body was in a flaming torment.

William Rafe knew then what a good life had wrought for the minister; and Geordie Mackay couldn't speak enough of the human nature in him when he heard how from his pillows he studied the rooks in the manse garden, and got to know each one, and his mate, and the nest, and all. And every morning the canary came up to sing for him. But

Miss Isobel wouldn't have the poll parrot in the room, the bird singing psalms that were like to make her greet; though the minister said it was better than the bad language it used on Sabbath.

And many a bonnie tale he told the doctors about his cheery window, and the birds that were a treat to him, till they forgot he was a minister and a dying man, and talked with him making jokes that were surely not seemly for a manse sick-room. But the young doctor, who, not being a Methodist, knew but little of true religion, was sure that if aught could have converted him, it would have been the minister's beautiful spirit through his sickness. So the time went on, and Miss Isobel got whiter every day and the minister weaker. And though he was prayed for every Sabbath, there was a feeling in the kirk it was no use to pray, a miracle being needed to restore him again.

One night William wouldn't leave the lassie alone, and they sat beside the minister, the doggie at the foot of the bed not closing his eyes, but watching with them, as if he knew what was coming. And suddenly the little creature rose trembling and quaking

and growling, seeing what none else could see.

Miss Isobel started to quiet him, but when she saw the look on her father's face she turned, all in a tremble and dumb, to William. He had seen the minister's changed face, and he just put out his arms to her—

'Lassie, although he's away, there's one here that loves you.'

So he caught her to his heart, and there she sobbed out her sorrow.

Then Skye began to bark, and looking up, William saw the dog wagging his tail, and the minister's hand feeling out to him.

'Lassie! he's no deid! He's to live!' he cried joyful-like, and with a sharp cry, Miss Isobel tore herself from him, seeing the moving hand.

But what a lassie she was! She turned and gave William a box on the ear, and flung herself, laughing and crying, on her knees by the bed.

* * * * *

And it wasn't so very long after that, that the kirk was crowded, full as it could hold, to hear the minister that had come back from the gates of death. And Miss Isobel sat

listening, with a bonnie light on her face that was surely not from the stained window, for the same light caught William Rafe, whether at the instrument or in the singers' seat, where he sat with his hand over his face, and his eyes glinting through his fingers at the lassie in the manse pew.

And Kirsty always remembered that Sabbath as the one when David lost count of the pence thrown into the plate for the silver that covered it.

CHAPTER V

A Child of the Sea

I mind of Mr Grahame telling in the first sermon he ever preached in the Totum Kirkie how man grows from less to greater, putting out fresh powers and gaining new faculties till he is fully what God means him to be. And I can remember how Kirsty took ill with the sermon.

She came into kirk that day in a new gown, and couldn't sit for seeing Elspeth Mackay, in the pew before her, wearing the fellow to it. But, however, she was sarcastic on the sermon afterwards; for, being a servant at the manse, she made the most of her right to criticise the minister in the pulpit.

'Na, na,' said she; 'he had no call to give oot that a man can be built up fra the puir life that floats in the jelly fish we see whiles doon at the shore.'

And indeed, it takes a deal of faith for a

woman with a tongue like Kirsty's to believe that she has grown from the dumb things that keep a silence more sorrowful-like than any other creature's cries. But David M'Naughten stood by her. He wouldn't be so bold as to disagree with the minister ; but he had a man's wish to believe that Eve was taken out of Adam's ribs. It was the one argument he dare venture when he wrestled with Kirsty, who was for thinking woman the better man ; and he was fain to hope man had had the start of the woman in life, and that they were not developed together from lower forms. But how should it be difficult to take humanity that way, seeing life rises everywhere, from the small to the great, from the seed to the flower and tree ?

And it is the same with places. We have in the town's library histories of Skyrle—braw books telling about the Abbey and the old monks ; but there is none of them can carry us back to the beginning of Skyrle, when the fishers' cottages fringed the burn, and the life of the place was the life of the sea. And it is from this that the town has risen—stepping over the burn and climbing the brae, and at last throwing itself down on the common, its chim-

neys and mills like great limbs flung into the air as it lies in the sun.

But though Kirsty was severe with the minister's sermon, there was one in the kirk that day who would value it all the more because there was the sound of the sea in it.

He sat in the corner ; a small man, shy and strange and silent ; with eyes brown and clear like seaweed, and a strong face with gentle lines about the mouth.

Mr Grahame noticed him; and heard from William Rafe afterwards that he was Sandy Nicholls ; a fine man, but close, living a lonely life and caring for naught but the sea. And, indeed, it was a strange thing and mysterious, how all his life he had had no friend but the sea ; even as a bairn finding companionship in the waves that ever seemed speaking to him. It was for all the world like the soul in the burn that hears the sea calling to it. And none could wonder it was so when Sandy's story was known.

Margot his mother, was a twelve months wife when her man went away to the herring-fishing, from which he didn't come back with his mates ; and there's many in Skyrle can remember her walking the shore with her eyes

set—looking out over the sea for Davie; while her heart trembled thinking of what was coming to her over a wider sea.

The babe came home; and none had the heart to tell her how Davie had been washed overboard within sight of Skyrle harbour on the very night his wee son was born.

She knew it all too soon, poor body; and they tell the tale in the town to this day—how one morning saw an awesome sight on the shore. The waves had given her back her man, and he lay close by the rocks, his dead face pressed into the sand by the dead face of the wife who had gone far to meet him. The weed left by the tide was curled about them, and the babe's tiny fingers were tangled in it. He lay smiling and happy in the sun—the little orphan bairn—and the sight brought tears to the eyes of the man who had found them.

It was John Gouck, a big, idle, tender-hearted lad, who never had had the wit to get him a wife. He stood biting his thumb, and looking down sorely puzzled how to handle the babe. Then he got a hold of it; and carrying it as if it was a drowned kitten, he bore it home to his sister Maggie, put it in the room, then hastened away down the lane, keeking round

to see what would happen to the bairn. He knew well Maggie wouldn't be very well pleased at what he had done; for she was not a young lass, and having never been asked in marriage had a kind of grudge against the innocent weans; and fine and angered she was to see the bairn laid within the door. She rose full of wrath against John, and cried that she would take the babe to the poor's house that very minute. But when she lifted him in her arms that had never held a babe, and felt his wee head on her bosom, the woman in her woke; and she sat down holding him close, and greeting.

John watched a long hour to see her come out; and when he slunk ben the house to his diet he was frightened, expecting a thrawn and vengeful woman. It made another man of him to see Maggie cheery and smiling, and the babe asleep in a basket on the hearth, and from that day Sandy never wanted father or mother.

All Skyrle lads love the sea. But John was never so taken up with it as some; and liked better to wander in the Abbey, watching the jackdaws, than on the cliffs of a summer's night. And it was beautiful at the sunset to

walk among the graves in the Abbey, with the shadows lying on the grass like a sleep, and the singing of the birds sounding clear in the silence, and the peace of the dead hushing the strife of the living.

But just so soon as wee Sandy could toddle John had to cease his walks in the Abbey; for it was always the sea with the bairn. And 'I'm for the big watter, dad,' he'd say, tugging at John's breeks to lead him to the shore. It was pretty to see how the bairn could do as he would with big John Gouck that was more obstinate than Maggie his sister;—and worse cannot be said of any man.

It was always the sea with Sandy; and when he could not be found, Maggie reached down the tawse and went to the shore. And there, sure enough, he would be, playing in the boats or helping the fishermen dry their nets or bait their lines. He was a seaman born; and when John Gouck died and Maggie put the lad to work in Rafe's mill there was a great controversy in the town about it. And to see the wee, white facie of him, as he turned his back on the sea, and went through the mill doors, was enough to melt the heart of any but a self-willed woman.

But Maggie had never forgiven herself for being so soon conquered by the bairn; and though he was the apple of her eye, she was aye thwarting him to prove to herself and the neighbours that she was not so daft over the boy as John. It was cruel to her to think of his going to the sea that had been the death of father and mother; but she did not say so. She made as though she sought but her own way in sending the laddie to the mill; and nothing the folk said could move her. And none, not even Sandy, guessed it was her love for him that made her cross him in the wish of his heart. But she would not have found it so easy to bend his will to hers, if he had not just then become a member of the Totum Kirkie. He had been newly gathered by the minister—a young lad who, being a great man for the sea, preached some awful grand sermons on it when he first came to the charge. Sandy heard them every one; and when it came to the sermon on ‘Deep calleth unto deep’ there was that in his heart which answered to the call. He went from the kirk into the manse; and the next week everybody kenned that he had joined the minister’s class. And it was this

that made him obey her who had been a mother to him, though it broke his spirit to be taken from the fisher's life.

After that it was pitiful to see him on summer nights, not playing on the common with the other laddies, but wandering on the shore, seeking company among the crabs and buckies and sea-flowers and such like.

So he came to man's years, a douce lad that was respected in the mill and in the church; though, to be sure, he was not much use in the Totum Kirkie, not being ready with his tongue or with his silver, as a good Methodist should be. But though he was canny with the bawbies in public, the fisher-wife knew where to turn when help was wanted. And if he was a silent man, he was not deaf to the voice of distress.

It didn't astonish any Skyrle body that he should go a-wooing to a fisher-lassie; though the fisher-folk will wed but among themselves. It was to be expected that Lizbeth Mackenzie should say him nay; but it came as a blow to the young lad; and from that day he was more dour-like than ever. And it was a sad thing that the lassie should say to him: 'I like you weel, laddie, and gin you had

been a fisher-laddie I would surely hae thocht on't.'

He had an awful white face on him that night; which made Maggie more than usual hard to him, she being afraid of greeting, through sympathy with his trouble.

For weeks after that the sound of the sea was terrible to him, and he was no more on the cliffs or by the shore. And when the looms stopped working, and the roar of the waves could be heard in the mill, a great sadness would come into his eyes; and he would set his face hard and turn again to his labour as if he would silence the voice that called to him.

By-and-by Lizbeth was wedded to Andrew Cargill at Eastha'en; and by degrees the old ways came back to Sandy, and he would seek his pleasure on the shore—a lonely man and silent, scarcely smiling but when among the bairns in the school, or seeking shells for them on the sands. So he settled down into a douce bachelor, a good son to Maggie, and a great stand-by in the Totum Kirkie.

The Goucks had been great Methodists. And fine and proud was Maggie to tell how her grandmother had out-witted the folk on the occasion of the Reverend John Wesley's

coming in 1770. Her man had opened his mill for the meetings, and had gone off with Mr Wesley while his wife stayed with the folk who were not for leaving the meeting so soon.

It was well known that the miller's wife had the gift of tongues; and whenever the minister was away she took up the Word, and began telling how her Church was the true Church, and her faith the true faith. She was so mighty sure of this, she said, that although the mill dam was full to the brim she could walk from the one side of it to the other without sinking. There were some that took her at her word; and, whether she would or no, they led her to the dam for her to prove her faith that way.

At the water-side she offered up a prayer, then rose; then she asked the folk if they thought she could do it.

'Ou ay, wifie; we believe it well eneuch—on you go!' they cried to her.

'Na, na,' said she; 'since ye're a' sae weel convinced i' your ain minds, your faith maun een be as guid and as soond as my ain; sae it would serve na guid end did I fash mysel' workin' a meerikle.'

With a forbear like that it was no wonder that the Goucks were well thought of in the Totum Kirkie; but, though Sandy had been brought up among the Methodists, he took ill with often losing the minister. And every three years, when they changed, he spent a week of Sabbaths on the cliffs till the new minister had got hardened to a Scotch congregation. But Maggie was very well pleased with the system that made her a proud woman every third year. And as soon as the manse had a new minister in it, she bade him to his tea at her house, and brewed the tea in the pot John Wesley had used; and talked the whole evening of John Wesley and John Gouck—especially of John Gouck.

And when she lay on her death-bed, she was well content to die, knowing that the intimation of her death would be in the 'Recorder.' And she boasted of it to all the neighbours, saying how the 'Recorder' was a great paper among the Methodists, and almost as grand a one as the 'Skyrle Argus' which has all the deaths in the town intimated in it, and is fine and instructive to read.

'And Sandy,' said she with her last breath,

'gie me your word as a church-member that you'll no' go to sea after I'm awa.'

Maggie Gouck needn't have asked that hard promise from Sandy, for even had he would have done it, it was too late then to turn to the sea. He was over forty, and had worked in Rafe's mill seven-and-twenty years.

Old William Rafe was dead, and young William had the mill, and was sorely in want of a man like Sandy to advise him. They were both members of Mr Grahame's class, and had the same religious views; and there is nothing like meeting in the same kirk and believing the same doctrines for knitting folk together.

William had not long been master before Sandy was advanced to a good post in the mill, and this made Kirsty very bitter. Years before she had set her cap at Sandy, and though she and David M'Naughten were courting, it irked her to see an unwed man getting the salary that should go to keep wife and bairns. And specially she grudged the luck to Sandy, for a woman cannot forgive a man that has slighted her courting. She took the trouble to give William Rafe a pretty piece of her mind when she heard Sandy was to get

a better wage; but William never heeded her. He knew fine to let a woman do the talking so long as the doing remained to him. So, while he hearkened to Kirsty—it being a day's journey to get away from her tongue—she could not move him from his intent.

He was a pushing lad, William, and soon his mill got a name in the town for being first with improvements in machinery and the like. And more than one of the other mill-owners shook his head, saying it was a pity old Rafe had not left a little caution to his son along with the silver. However, William prospered, and one day he got some braw new machinery into the mill. When the thing was unpacked, it stood trembling and quivering, for all the world like a high-spirited horse, and the men held their breath, looking at the delicate springs and shining steel bands of it.

'She's a braw leddy,' said Sandy, stroking it tender-like.

'Ay, is she,' cried William, 'a braw leddy and a costly. And there's none in the mill shall put a hand to her saving yourself, Sandy.'

From that day Sandy was a man content. It may have been that the noise of the machinery reminded him of the sea and the

turning of the wheels of the curling waves, for after that he did not find the mill so irksome as before.

He had always been a lonely man, but the engine seemed a friend to him ; for he treated it like a human thing and gave it the love that no creature had ever wanted from him. The men chaffed him about 'Jennie,' as they called it ; but, indeed, it was pitiful to see his tender way with it, and his timorous touch as if the creature could feel.

William was a fine lad ; but there was surely something hard about him, when, knowing how Sandy's love gathered round his Jennie, he had him moved into another part of the mill to tend a finer engine he had brought from the south.

Sandy said no word to him ; but there was a pitiful look on his face when he went into the room where the new engine seemed to mock his sad heart. It was summer-time in Skyrle, and the cliffs were all a-blossom with sea-daisies, and campion, and maiden-pink ; with dwarf-heather and yellow gorse that's in flower when love is in fashion. And, indeed, there is no day, winter or summer, but the thorny stem will hold up a golden cup somewhere on the cliff-side. And I've seen Miss

Isobel winning home on a December day with her hands full of the yellow blossoms that made the manse drawing-room a picture.

The lassie was often on the cliffs that summer, and when she met Sandy, she had a gay word for him always; and the doggie Skye would never pass without giving him a paw to shake; but they couldn't drive the trouble from his face. Miss Isobel asked William what ailed Sandy, and he answered that he bothered overmuch about his work, and was thinking he was not able for managing the new machinery. And this was likely true, for the responsibility of it fretted Sandy. His nerves were aye on the strain. The engine moved intricate machinery, and had secret curious ways of its own that were hard to mind of, and that, forgotten, would cause terrible accidents among the looms. He struggled with it like a man; but there was a noise of waters in his ears that drove him desperate with longing to get away from the stifling mill into the air full of the sound of the sea. The old power came on him, stronger than ever; and he would wander half the night on the cliffs to fit him for the work that weighed on him through the day.

At the New Year he besought William to take him from tending the machine; but William lost his patience with him, and told him sharply there was no other that could do his work, and there was nothing more to be said.

Sandy went out from the mill that day more wae than ever; but Miss Isobel met him, and, seeing how it was with him, craved a favour if he would. The lad had no heart for granting favours, but he couldn't deny the lassie; and she took him to the manse to his tea, and heartened him with her chatter till he almost forgot his troubles at the mill.

Miss Isobel would have the names of the flowers on the cliffs, and told him how she loved the gorse better than any of them. And for many Sabbaths after she found a bit of yellow blossom sitting on the ledge of the manse pew. No one ever said who had put it there; but the lassie would turn smiling to Sandy and nod at him. And this was a scandal to Widdy Rafe, who thought such conduct unseemly in a daughter of the manse. But I'm sure it was that smile that kept Sandy from breaking down over his work; and it cannot be unseemly to cheer a lonely heart, whether in the kirk or out of it.

When Mr Grahame was taken sick, there was none that felt it more than Sandy. He had been a favourite with the minister, and the want of a kind word now and again was sore on him. His work was always more of a burden, and a strained look was in his eyes. It seemed as if that engine was a bodily terror that he couldn't get away from.

But none noticed how it was with him. Miss Isobel was nursing the minister, and William had no thought but for the manse people, and Sandy was not heeded by anybody whatever. He lived by himself, and none guessed how he neglected his food and couldn't rest; lying awake through the night, or else walking out on the cliffs under the cold, wintry stars. His mates saw him at his work; and if they noted the look on him they did not inquire if he ailed anything.

So it came to March, when Skyrle was white with drifting snow. The air danced with the thick flakes on the night when they sought Sandy up and down the shore.

He had been a lonely man, but it was wonderful to see the number of those eager to face the stormy night seeking him. Along the shore they went, and up the frozen road past St

Ringan's Well; and the red lights of the lanterns were like sudden roses in the snow on the cliff paths. Far and near through the stern night they travelled; William Rafe nigh distraught, fearing death had overtaken Sandy.

In the dawn he went into the manse, his pale face frightening Miss Isobel, who had been up all night with the minister.

'Have you found him?' she asked whenever she saw him.

He shook his head, and the lassie's face changed.

'We can find no trace,' said William. 'It is four days since he has been a-missing. He was last seen out by the cliffs.'

'But surely, surely, there must be some trace?' said Miss Isobel very earnest.

'Only this,' and William opened his hand. His fingers were bleeding, for they had closed over a sprig of blossoming gorse and the thorns had pierced.

'It isn't much of a guide,' he said; 'but Georgie Mackay saw him with a bunch of the flower four days ago.'

Miss Isobel gave a cry, then her face trembled.

'He must have been getting it for me; he

has been caught in the storm and lost. He is dead—and—and, it is for me!’

‘No, no, lassie, it is my blame,’ William groaned. ‘I kept him to the work that he hadn’t strength for. I thought more of my advantage than of Sandy, and—’

With that he bent down his head, and Miss Isobel heard him sob. She rose and knelt on the floor beside him, throwing her arms round his neck while the tears ran down her bonnie face.

* * * * *

The snow never stays long in Skyrle, and it leaves the rocks near the shore as soon as it falls. When the storm was over and everywhere the drifts were melting, they found him on the very spot where he had lain a smiling babe beside his dead father and mother.

The seaweed had twined a crown about his hair. His fingers still held a bunch of blossoming gorse.

CHAPTER VI

May-Day

The Sabbath school swarree is the bonniest sight in all the year, and it is a picture to see the happy bairns riding all the road to Fyston Den on the luries decked with flowers and bracken. It is not only the bairns, but the mothers and fathers, and all the kirk members, that go out to the den on that day; and, young and old, we are all bairns together once in the year. Two hours before it is time to start, you may see the children gathering in Ponderlaw and looking in through the kirk gates, impatient for their opening, and then David M'Naughten saunters along with his eyes cast down and his lips pursed up making as if he can't see the bairns. But for all that he opens the gate only just far enough to let himself in; and he is very particular to bolt it on the other side when he goes into the manse

garden to inquire of Kirsty if the berries are ripening.

After a while Geordie Mackay crosses the road with a creel full of books, and parcels, and toys for the prizes; and the bairns cannot contain themselves with the desire to get into the kirk.

'An' are ye wantin' in, bairns?' says Geordie, very grave.

'Ay, are we,' they cry, leaping about him and shouting.

'I doubt you'll no' be winnin' in,' he says drily and locks the gate behind him. But they get in when William Rafe comes; and he gives them leave to flatten their noses against the diamond panes of the vestry windows while he and Geordie and David count over the tickets sold, and add up the cost of the tea, and the money they will make by it. At last the luries roll up—six big luries—and a bunch of fern is nodding on the head of each horse; and each driver is chewing a piece of stalk and taking no manner of interest whatever in the bairns. Then there is laughing and shouting and struggling till they are all on the luries, with their little legs dangling over the sides, and their little faces hot with happi-

ness gazing up at the manse window. There stands the minister, and Miss Isobel is beside him with the doggie in her arms, and the luries are waiting till he gives the word to go.

Then Jamie Murphy straightens his bonnet, and Alec M'Dougall hitches his plaid on his shoulder, and the two step to the front with the pipes, and stand with their cheeks puffed out, ready to begin. The minister waves his hand; the pipes skirl bravely; the doggie barks; the bairns cheer; the great wheels turn; they are off and away to the den! And for many a mile the clouds of dust show the road they have travelled to Fyston. In the den how happy they are. The bagpipes play; the choir sings; the bairns dance. The minister ceases to think of his sermon, and Kirsty's tongue wags kindly once in the year; while everybody makes the most of the bonnie day, the green shade, the air, the sea, and the bairns' happiness. Ay, but it is well to be young and innocent, and able for the joy of life! And, thank God, we can be that; though the sods on which we dance to-day shall be laid above our heads to-morrow.

Kirsty always said that Geordie Mackay

was the making of the school swarree, and I must say that he was a wonder among the folk on those days. But likely it was only because the poor lad saw himself where he could be blithesome and happy. He was a real child of nature, finding his best pleasure among the birds and insects, and flowers and trees; and always seeking to understand the men and women round him. Kirsty had never much of an opinion of him, Geordie being one of those unlucky lads that think but little of women, and particularly little of gossips like Kirsty. He was always writing ballants, and putting bits of rhyme together; and it seemed to Kirsty a foolish twisting of words out of their natural way, and like to Barrie Allister's curls that were not her own but due to curl-papers and many a sair head. But, however, the rhymes pleased Geordie and kept him in occupation when he might have been taken up with some other body's poems in curls. And that is unsettling for any young lad and apt to drive the poetry inwards.

But Geordie was scarce in his teens before he was set to study human nature in a hard school. Kirsty and Widdy Rafe still talk over

their tea of his mother and his sister Nan ; and indeed a more heart-breaking history never kept two women's tongues from wearying.

Mrs Mackay had been a woman of a meek spirit, the wife a man is fain to marry when he would be master in the house. And, to be sure, Robbie Mackay showed himself a power in his family till he was carried off by a misadventure at the mill. Then, having none to worry her in this world, the widdy broke her heart with wearying to join Robbie in the other. Poor body she had had little experience of a quiet life ; and indeed she knew nothing of the life to come, but she was one of those women that think the things they don't possess must needs be better than those they have. And I would not be for saying Mrs Mackay did not find out her error in the long last. But, however, the Book tells us they neither marry nor are given in marriage in the next world ; and, that being so, I would fain hope the power of the man is limited, and that he finds in the angel the discipline he missed in the wife.

A year after her husband died Mrs Mackay was touched by a stroke ; and from that hour she sat day and night in her chair in the ingle and never stirred a limb of herself for fifteen

long years. She had the bairns Geordie and Nan beside her, and the two young things were just devoted to the helpless mother. They tended her themselves Nan rising twice through the night to feed her. But it was not to be expected that the lassie should be able long for such work, and when she was turned sixteen she began to pine and dwine away.

It was then Geordie showed what spirit he had, and each night he rose and went to his mother and Nan. And this he did till the time when he was left alone.

Nan was the first to go; and well I mind the day when the coffin was lifted into the room for the widow to gaze on her young lassie away before her. Her fingers twitched as if they would fain have stroked the dead face, but she could not move and she sat with not even a tear for the bairn she loved. We all thought she was to follow Nan; but she lived on, Geordie waiting on her with the help of one of the neighbours, and watching beside her through the nights. It was then he wrote his poetry, and grand were the rhymes he made, though they could not match the poem that he was living, and that never was put into words. But when his mother was laid

beside Nan in the Abbey yard, it was plain how the long, weary nights had tried him. He had not taken a whole night's sleep for years, and now when there was none needing his care, he could not bide in his bed, but would rise and walk in and out of the rooms until he was like to lose his wits.

He was a tall lad with a stoop in his back, and his eyes big and soft like a lassie's, and the Skyrle lads mocked at him for an old wife. But he was more of a man than any one of them in his intellect, though he would not join in the curling on the pond, or the bowling on the green, or the cricket on the common. He wearied through the days; and Kirsty told him it would run him into an unnecessary expense to set up a stone to Nan and his mother, and 'twould be better to bide while he was lying beside them, and then the one inscription would do for the three. And the whole town was of the same mind as Kirsty, seeing his white, wan face and spiritless manner. Then the doctor bade him go to the south, and after he had journeyed about the country, and seen the terrible strange ways of English folk, he came back to Skyrle very well content to be among his own again.

He was not able for work; and he sought his pleasure on the fells and moors, and learned the names of the butterflies that love the heather, and the ways of the bees and spiders and ants, that the other laddies passed without seeing.

The bairns liked well enough to walk with Geordie, for he could call all the stones and birds and flowers on the cliffs, and could give grand names to the sea-weed and shells left by the tide on the beach. The cliffs were grand company for him, and he was never lonely walking on them watching the sunrise, or sauntering along with the gloaming light red on the water, and the fishing boats asleep on a dreaming sea. Surely, surely, there never was a bonnier place than Skyrle, and I am like to greet thinking of the days that will come no more. When Geordie sat in the kirk on Sabbath, he was maybe more lonely than any other time, for I've seen his blue eyes grow wistful and dim, and I've known his thoughts were out by among the shadows in the Abbey yard.

It was at the school swarree in Fyston Den that he had the first thought of marriage and Barbara Allister.

The bairns had gone out to their tea, and the den was full of happy faces and children's voices. It was a bonnie place and had been formed by the burn winning down through the slack to the sea. At one time the water had travelled through a flat country, but year by year it had worn the ground and hollowed out a channel for itself, deepening it till now the burn sang at the bottom of a steep dell.

The birks and rowan-trees rose from the slopes and met overhead; and at their feet the flowers glinted through sprays of bracken and fern and tangled grass. A randy path wound down the den, and you followed it till just when you lost the burn you found the sea. Eh, and it is often that way in life. We lose what made our hearts gladsome, and then, ere the tears are well out of the eye, we have a sight of some bigger happiness spread out before us.

On the day of the picnic, Geordie had wearied himself serving the bairns. They had sat round on the grass, and he had given each bairn a wee bag with a cookie and three pieces of fine bread in it. The tea had been infused ere the lurries started from Skyrle; and David M'Naughten—with Kirsty beside him, be sure!

—stood and filled the cups from the big pitchers; and he'd fill some of the cups six times ere the bairns would be content.

All at once there was something to do among the lassies; and there was Barbara Allister with her red cheeks all a-fire and her black eyes glowing because the proud hussies wouldn't let her sit with them, she being in the gown she was used to wear at her work in the mill. The lassie was an orphan, and it took her all her time to live, without getting the hats and gowns that were a temptation to the mill lassies. It was a kittle work to quiet Barbara when she was in a rage; but when Miss Isobel heard what the trouble was, she set her lips and rose in her high way.

'Come and sit with me, Barbara dear,' said she, and she led her out before them all, and gave Barrie her tea beside her; and afterwards she called the doggie, Skye, and made him shake hands with the lassie, and beg for cookies and go through his tricks till Barrie had forgotten her old frock, and was as blithe as any.

Geordie hadn't seen this, and, being wearied, he wandered away and laid himself down among the ferns; where he maybe thought of a rhyme

or two about the flowers and the bees, and the burnie and the trees, and all the bonnie sights around him. Or maybe he just fell a-nodding and dreamed. But, however, he heard the sound of singing, and lifted his eyes to see a crimson light streaming through the heuch, and the tree trunks rising tall and straight and white round him, and at the head of the path two young lassies dancing down hand-in-hand.

The one was golden-haired, and the other a gipsy for darkness; but they each had flowers in their hair and sang as they danced. And in the red light the fair young things looked like spirits. Then Geordie saw no more. And while he kind of swooned his dream went on, and it seemed to him that a soft hand was laid on his mouth; or maybe his mother had kissed him. He woke all in a daze. There was something on his lips, and when he put up his hand he felt it was a flower.

Well, being a poet, Geordie saw more in that than mere lassies' fun. He pinned the rose in his coat; and afterwards he flushed red as the pickling cabbages in the manse garden to see Barrie Allister with her hand full of roses the fellows to his.

After that Geordie would wander in the den at the gloaming and think about Barrie; though, to be sure, he said he was studying human nature. And often he shut his een and saw round him the tall trunks of the birks, the red light, and a lassie, with dark eyes and roses on her cheeks and in her hands, singing through the den.

* * * * *

On May Day, all the lads and lassies in Skyrle go out to the cliffs in the early morning; the lassies to wash their faces in May dew, and the lads to gather primroses and choose their sweethearts for the year.

Geordie Mackay had always loved the custom, and every year he went out to watch the young folk making happy together. He liked the simple bonnie way of it; and found a deal of poetry in the day dawning over the sea, and the pale light of the primroses in the copse, and among the uncurled fern fronds; in the sight of the blushing lassies, young and winsome, and the awkward laddies, shy and bold. And he liked to watch them come out blate and tender like the young day, and win back bold and hearty as the noon.

And many beside Geordie have had reason

to think well of the first of May in Skyrle. Geordie had no thought of the dreariness of winning out to the cliffs all alone till the May after the swarree that had caused him to get into confusion between human nature and a lassie.

He wandered out that morning, not rightly knowing whether or not he should make for the cliffs; but he found himself on the brae with the sea stretching out dim and patient, and the dawn stirring in the east. He was early enough; but a woman's figure stood out on the Ness, and when he came near he saw it was Kirsty.

'Weel, Kirsty,' said he, 'I'm doubting David wull no come a-Maying the noo.'

Kirsty made him no answer, making as if she didn't see him.

'Ay, Kirsty,' said Geordie, climbing up beside her; 'his auld banes wull no take weel wi' pulling primroses.'

'And wha are you, mocking the lichtsome day wi' siccan havers?' said Kirsty glowering on him. 'Maybe I'm winning out to wash my face in May-dew wi' a' the ither lassies.'

'Tosh, woman, you're weel-favourt eneuch wi'oot stooping to siccan like airts. Na, na,

Kirsty, it's seeking David that you are. Toots! a' the world kens he is wantin' you.'

'Aweel!' said Kirsty, very well pleased with the compliment; 'I'm no to say Dawvid's no been speirin' at me this whilie. Na, na, I've no cause to fash mysel' huntin' the gowk on the cliffs.'

'Then it's the sunrise you're for admirin'?' said Geordie very simply.

'Havers, man! it's just Miss Isobel that was fain to leave her bed and win oot to see the lassies mak' fools o' the laddies. Eh, but she could see that ony hoor o' the day—she could that.'

'Puir lassie, she's but young. When she's your age, Kirsty—'

'She'll no be fashed crackin' wi' a witless loon, I'll promise,' said Kirsty very sharp. She had had a sight of David on the cliff-path, and was wishful to be rid of Geordie ere David came up.

'And where's the lassie?' Geordie asked.

'And where wad she be?' said Kirsty all in a flutter.

Well she knew that David wouldn't go a-Maying that morn if Geordie was to have his laugh at him. And just in the moment Geordie

cast his eyes down and spied David panting up the Ness, which was a stiff climb for a stout widdy-man with eight of a family.

'I'll no leave you, Kirsty, unless you tell me where Miss Isobel is,' said Geordie. And he looked at her very straight.

'She's bedded,' said Kirsty, sairly put about; 'and I'll be obliged tae ye if you'll gang your ain gate the noo.'

'Ou, ay, I'll wish ye a guid day, Kirsty; for here's David winning oot to tak tent o' the minister wha's in his bed snoring.' With that Geordie walked on laughing; for indeed it was a treat to see a woman of Kirsty's years going a-Maying like a young lassie. But there! a woman may know everything, and yet not know when she is past youth. Kirsty had led David out that morning to settle with him; and she kept him a while on the cliffs, and flattered him into thinking he was a young man, till—what with the flattery, and needing his breakfast, and wearying for quiet—he lost his head and proposed marriage to her. Eh! I'm thinking it will be a long day before the Skyrle lassies give the lads leave to cease the Maying on the cliffs.

Well, Geordie walked on, seeing the young

folk pairing off and setting themselves to pull the flowers; but he was not for joining them, and he dandered past Dorrent's Den where the primroses grow thickest, and crossed the loaning, and so reached Fyston Den. The doves were cooing, and a soft light was round about the birks. All was fresh and young and green, and the morn touched the secret in his heart, and gave him a pain that was surely a pleasure, he took such a delight in it.

If he had thought to go a-Maying he must have had a sair heart when he was through the woods, for he had not pulled a single flower, or had speech with a woman besides Kirsty. But, however, his face was fine and glad; and as he walked he told himself how he would not have a fine lady for wife, but would seek a lassie that he could train in simple, natural ways to be a mate for him.

'And,' says he, 'there's a deal of human nature in Barrie Allister, and she's a fine lassie and orphaned. Maybe she would quit the mill and go to school for a year or two, till she's old enough to be wedded. A lassie like that wouldna set her will up against mine, gin she was early taught a wife's duty to her

man. Eh, but I'm hoping Barrie will be willing to think about it.'

By this time Geordie had reached the open road, and Skyrle lay spread out before him, with the mill chimneys rising tall and straight, and the Abbey in their midst, and the blue sea fringing all. It was a bonnie sight, and the picture pleased Geordie, for Skyrle was the place where Barbara was to be trained to his liking. By-and-by he would wed her under the shadow of the mills, and when they had spent their lives together in the home that was to be the wonder of the neighbours for its simple ways, they would rest together under the shadow of the grey old Abbey.

He was very well content by the time he went through the streets, and it seemed like a providence when just at the Abbey pend he came on Barbara with her hands full of primroses. Her cheeks were red as roses, and her eyes sparkled when she saw how blate Geordie looked at the sight of her. He was wearying to have speech with her, but he could think of nothing to say, and he stood with his mouth open and his knees shaking till she had passed him by. And when he saw her back his wits came to him again.

‘Barrie,’ he cried to her, ‘Barrie, wull you no gie me a flooer?’

But she just flouted him and ran on laughing. And Geordie hung his head, feeling a weighty heart within him as he walked through the pend.

‘Na, na,’ he said to himself, ‘there’s a posseebeelity o’ gettin’ ower muckle human nature in a lassie. I’ll no be thinkin’ o’ marriage and—’

’Twas then he stopped. The saucy lass had turned and cast a bunch of primroses at him, and they had smote him full on the cheek.

CHAPTER VII

Her Heart's Desire

It was well known in Skyrle that the Totum Kirkie was not altogether as peaceful within itself as it might be; for although nor Kirsty nor Widdy Rafe would let any other body speak against the Methodists, they had many a word to say one against the other. And indeed it was a treat to them that Elspeth Mackay's man should aye be giving occasion for their tongues to wag. I mind how the two would sit over their tea cracking about the manse and the kirk, the members and the minister, till Miss Isobel couldn't sew a new shirt to her father but the whole town knew of it. And there was none that bought a hymn-book from David but Kirsty knew the price and the bargaining that had passed ere David would lay it in the pew for use on the Sabbath. And Kirsty herself could

tell the spirit of each body in the kirk by the way they treated their books.

Elspeth Mackay, poor body, was awful fond of John Wesley, and aye put a kerchief round the book of his hymns after the sermon on Sabbath night. She had her lassie, Eppie, growing up, and she thought how the book would be needed when she herself was laid in the Abbey graveyard.

But Kirsty often said how the folding up of the book minded her of Elspeth herself; for the poor body was just bound about by a life that hid her from all, though it was fair and white to look upon. And indeed many a time I have thought that the soul under her sad face was just as bonnie and full of thought as the hymns that made the singing in our kirk the best in all the town.

Kirsty always had a feeling against Elspeth, because she had gotten a man of her ain—though, to be sure, he was not much to be proud of when she had gotten him. But some women are that way, and would sooner marry two wooden legs than none at all.

It was terribly edifying to see how Kirsty had tried now one and now another, and had failed with all till she was fain to make up to

David, a widow man with eight bairns. And then, just so soon as she was like to have a lad of her own, she turned and flouted Elspeth. And this was natural, seeing that the two women had been friends all their lives.

There were many in Skyrle could mind of Elspeth as the bonniest lassie in the town, even though now her patient, white face was sealed with a silence that she hadn't broken for years.

She lived in the Abbey Wynd, and worked at Rafe's mill through the day, so silent-like and so solitary that none of the neighbours, not even Kirsty, dared ask her about her man. And yet it seemed but yesterday since she had gone out of the mill, with her bonnie face red as a rose, to her first tryst with Wullie Mackay. And it was surely a cruel thing for Kirsty, knowing that Wullie was a bad fellow, to stand by silent and let the lassie go. But she did that. She was maybe not overpleased at Elspeth getting a lad before her, or maybe it was because Elspeth hadn't told her aught about it. But, however, although she knew that Wullie wasn't a steady lad, she stood by and said nothing.

'Gin Elspeth had telled me she was courtin'

I micht hae had a ward wi' her aboot her sweetheart; but I winna speak the noo,' said she, setting her mouth very firm. And she let the lassie go unwarned to her sorrow.

Ay, but the poor thing must have been blinded not to see it for herself! But a mole can see fine compared with a woman when she's in love.

The marriage was at St Tammas's holidays, and after it the two were away to Dundee to spend the week ere the mills opened again.

There was surely no gladsomer heart than Elspeth's anywhere that day when she went out from Skyrle a blithe lassie, fair and innocent, and full of love for her Wullie. She was but seventeen, and life stretched before her with happiness glinting bright on it. She would have to work in the mill as she had aye wrought, for Wullie had not enough to keep the two; but she wasn't thinking of the toil. She was just very proud, thinking of the bonnie home she would make to herself and Wullie. For though she wasn't a clever lass like Kirsty, she knew the meaning of the words love and duty.

The poor, innocent lamb! A week after the wedding day she came back to Skyrle, with

the light gone from her eye and the joy from her heart, and but duty to anchor her to the life before her. She had wedded a drunken lout, and found it out too late. From that day Elspeth was a silent creature. She said no word to anybody, and bore her trouble alone; but she was a changed woman, and with her marriage morn her happiness ended.

During the courting Wullie had put a bridle on himself; but after the marriage his conduct was a scandal, and Kirsty took care that it should be no secret that Elspeth had never won her man.

Surely Kirsty was the biggest gossip Skyrle ever hearkened to. It pleased her to tell every body Elspeth had not done so well with Wullie, and would have been the better wanting him. And at the Abbey Wynd she wrought night and day to find out how Elspeth took with her bargain. But Elspeth set her lips, and though her voice trembled sore, she smiled when Kirsty asked, and would aye answer:—

‘Wullie is better to me than I merit, I’m obleeged to you, Kirsty. And I’m thinkin’ that love and duty are worth mair than happiness, Kirsty, in a woman’s life.’

And Kirsty couldn’t get her to say any other.

When Eppie was born, a kind of hope grew in Elspeth's heart that Wullie would change, and that the wee fingers would draw him in the right way. She would hold the bairn for a long hour, while she prayed that the little child might lead him into a different life. And it seemed as if this would be the way of it, for Wullie was fond of the girlie, and would win home sooner to have a romp with her ere she was bedded.

But the change didn't last long. Soon the drink had him fast again, and many a time the neighbours heard blows in the attic and although Elspeth didn't scream they knew he was using her ill.

At last wee Eppie began to fear him, and to run from him when he came in drunk, and this angered him more than her mother's silence. It was then a thrawn look came into Elspeth's eyes, and her breast rose. She could be patient for herself, but not for the bairn, and she always dreaded some hurt to her. And then, one day, worse than she had ever thought was at her threshold.

She came in from the mill to find the bairn sleeping, drunk—poor wee maid!—beside her drunken father. Elspeth didn't understand at

the first; but when the truth cut through her, her heart almost failed her, and she was near to hating the father of her child.

She lifted Eppie to her knee, and all the night through she sat there stunned, not able for anything but a dumb cry that God would take the wee maid to Himself, if that was the only way.

I don't rightly know what she said to Wullie, but he was canny the most of the day after. And he had need; for little Eppie was fevered, and it seemed that Elspeth's prayer was to be answered just on the moment. Towards the gloaming, however, the bairn looked up at her mother and smiled. 'See, Wullie,' said Elspeth softly, 'the wee maid is to live.'

He came beside her, putting out his hand to the baby, but she hid her face and wouldn't let him touch her; and at last he dashed out of the room, crying that it was Elspeth who had set the bairn against him.

From that day she altogether lost her hold on him, and it was a rare hour that found him without the drink in him.

She daredn't leave the girlie with him after that night, and would take her with her to the mill, where young William Rafe made an

awful pet of her till she would look at no other body in the place.

One Wednesday night, Elspeth had her early bedded, and won away to the minister's class at the Totum Kirkie. Mr Grahame was just getting over his sickness, and it was beautiful to hear his experience. Elspeth hearkened to him speaking of the good gifts to be gained from pain and trouble and difficulty, till her poor heart was lightened of its load; and she rose and went from the class with patient faith for the end of her trials.

Poor body! she needed all the comfort and strength the minister could give her. She was passing the tavern in Barber's Croft when her heart leaped within her and she halted, trembling.

Surely, surely it was not her Eppie speaking! A bairn's voice came out into the night, and she shuddered to hear the curses pouring from the wee mouth.

The poor creature pressed forward, holding her hand to her heart, and could scarce hear for greeting that such-like words should soil a bairn's lips. But she was like to die when she looked inside. There was Eppie in her bed-gown, staggering up and down the long

table, altogether foolish with the drink, saying the bad words.

And there stood her father among the other men, roaring and laughing to see the wee thing acting like a drunken clown. I cannot tell how Elspeth didn't die to see that sight. She held on to the door-brods, gripping them to keep herself from falling; and in another minute an awful shriek stopped the laughing in the room. Then she had gotten Eppie in her arms, and was fleeing along Barber's Croft as if the evil one was at her heels. As indeed he was; for no sooner was she in the attic than she knew that Wullie had cursed his bairn with his own awful weakness, and that Eppie's little fair body held the same devil that possessed her father.

'Mither, mither,' sobbed the littlin, 'I'm for mair o' the bonnie watter. Gie me anither drink like feyther's.'

And though Elspeth infused tea to her, and brought out the Sabbath sweeties, nothing would please Eppie, and she sobbed herself to sleep, greeting for the bonnie water.

After that Elspeth's one prayer was that the bairn might be taken from the evil to come, for as each day passed it made her the more

hopeless of ever rooting out the seed that had been planted in Eppie's nature. She was aye craving for the whisky, and made up to her father when she found she could get it from him. He was first with her now, and it pleased him fine to have the bairn's love, though he bought it at such a price.

In the meantime Elspeth's heart was like to break. But she kept her trouble to herself, and not even the minister knew the terrible fear that was upon her. Her white face, with an awful look on it, met him in the kirk every Sabbath, and he couldn't keep his eyes from seeing her. But he couldn't touch the sorrow hidden under that white silence. And when he spoke of joy and hope Elspeth changed the words to duty and love; and that kept her dumb when she might have won help by telling her trouble to the minister. And she was silent too towards Wullie, not giving him word for word, though indeed the mother's heart in her could not forgive the work he had wrought on the bairn.

It was the winter after Mr Grahame's sickness that her silence was broken. One night at the closing of the mill she hastened home,

thinking to take Eppie with her to a swarree at the Totum Kirkie.

The bairn was not in the house, but Babbie Stewart from the next room cried in to her that Wullie had gone out by the cliffs, taking Eppie with him.

This was sair news to Elspeth, for she aye dreaded the bairn being with her father.

'I'll follow them and maybe get her before the swarree,' she said to herself. And she put on her Sabbath gown in a hurry and hastened out.

The gloaming was all round her as she hurried along the brae, and the sea moaned black at her feet. But as she got past St Ringan's Well and climbed the Ness, a young moon glinted out and made a track of bonnie light across the dark waters. She couldn't see Wullie, but she heard voices before her, and her face grew whiter when from the sound she could tell he was not sober.

The bairn was cracking with him, and her voice was like his, hoarse and thick with the drink.

Elspeth's heart shuddered as she hearkened. She pressed on, but they were both silent and she couldn't tell where to seek for them.

‘Eppie,’ she called, ‘Eppie, my woman!’

They could not have heard her. The next instant Elspeth halted on the brow of the cliff, trembling with a great horror.

The silence had parted. A bairn’s voice had thrust through it to the mother’s ear—

‘Mither! mither!’

She wanted nothing to tell her what had happened. Her heart followed the sound, down, down, till the splash on the water below had printed itself on her brain.

How she reached Wullie she never knew. He was on his knees, leaning over the cliff-wall, a sober man.

‘Eppie, my bairn! Eppie!’ she wailed, pulling at his arm.

He was shaking with a mortal terror, and he couldn’t answer her.

‘Eppie!’ she said, and again, ‘Eppie, Eppie!’ And down below the waters muttered around a patch of white.

Wullie staggered to his feet at the cry she made, when her eye had a sight of it.

‘She is awa’!’ he said, hoarse-like — ‘ower the cliff! I couldn’t save her.’

‘Eppie, ma wee maid!’ said she, in a voice that pierced him like a knife.

‘God help her, she couldna live,’ he answered.

Then he caught his wife’s hand, for she was like to throw herself over the cliff.

‘It’s my blame, Elspeth,’ said he. ‘It’s my blame. It’s me what has killed the littlin.’

She turned her white face to him in the darkness, but she spoke no word and in the silence they heard the wash of the waves on the rock below.

Then an awful cry came out across the night.

‘Ma wee maid! Thank God! Thank God!’

CHAPTER VIII

The Battle of the Bannocks

Bab was firing bannocks. All the morn she had been mixing meal and water, and flattening and rounding the cakes, laying them on the griddle, and watching until their colour came clear and brown, with a glint of gold in the brown. It was a warm work. Her face burnt, and a patch of red showed up the leanness of her cheek-bones. She had never been bonnie; her eyes were tender and red about the lids, and her face was thin and peaked with a mildness in it that showed she was even-tempered. She wore a print, short gown, with the sleeves well above the elbows, and her scraggy arms bare. Her cotton frock, and her apron were dusted with the meal, but she had awful neat feet, and her shoes were well polished. Excepting for the make of her shoes, a body seeing Babbie Stewart would

have thought she had not an idea beyond bannocks.

And it was well seen that she gave a deal of thought to these, for she patted and shaped each cake in a dainty way she had with her, and she scarce took her eyes from it till it was perfect; a bonnie golden platter that made a fragrance in the house. The two piles of cakes on the table kept changing, the one growing larger the other less. Bab now and again looked at them with a kind of pride in her eye, and went on patting, and shaping, and firing without a stop in her work. But though her hands were full of the present, her heart had gone forward to meet the finish of the day.

After Sabbath, Wednesday was the day of all days to Bab; and this was a Wednesday. At seven o'clock that evening she would put off the drudge Bab with her cotton gown, and, gowned in her braws, she would put on the lassie Bab—Tam Fergusson's sweetheart. At the thought she began to sing, going over and over again a psalm-tune that seemed to her to hold in it the harmony of Tam's voice. It was the last tune they had learned Wednesday past at the choir-practice in the

Totum Kirkie, and she could hear his bass notes deepening through her own treble. The singing seemed to hasten the hour for the next practice, when she would sit opposite to Tam in the choir-pew, and there would be nothing between them but the fine link of the music that was like a passion with them both. Babbie's voice was not so bad; it somehow matched the colour of the bannocks on the table; and when she sang life and meaning came into her face. The pale skin with its patches of heat, had a glow in it; her grey eyes wakened; and out of them, like a bird from its nest, gazed a timid-like, beautiful happiness. She sang in the same dainty way that she had shaped the cakes.

Whenever the last was fired she laid it aside to cool, the while she set herself to clean up the house. She cleared away the board, and the basin in the which she had mixed the meal, and she swept up the splashes of meal that whitened the bricks. Then she brought a bucket and flannel and washed round about the floor, finishing it afterwards with a layer of red-rud that made the bricks like the terra-cotta images on the mantel in the manse drawing-room. And as

you saw her at her work it was clear to be seen that she was fine and clever with her hands; and as clean in herself as Miss Isobel at the manse, whose hardest labour was washing the doggie Skye.

Babbie was at the sink when her mother came ben the house. Nancy Stewart was one of the oldest members of the Totum Kirkie, and had wept at more farewell discourses than any other body in Skyrle. She was a wee creature and had been a married woman fifteen years ere her one bairn was born; and I mind well the explanations and apologies she made to the neighbours when the babe came home. But however she might affect to take ill with the child you could see her pride in it. None could say she spoiled Bab, for the poor lassie grew up with never a suspicion that she was the very apple of her mother's eye. Nancy was terrible stern with her, and might not have been mother to her; and indeed there was little resemblance between the two.

Nancy's wee body was just full of life, and her keen old face was as dry and as withered and as red as a yule apple. Her mouth was a thin line with hard corners, and

her lips were drawn tight across her teeth. Coming into the house her footmarks made wet tracks on the floor, but she stepped here and there, and walked all round about ere she would be content to sit her down. In the long last she found a chair and took the seat, wiping her face with the corner of her shawl.

‘Aweel, we hae dune wi’ thae Fergussons!’ she cried.

Bab turned slowlike—‘Mither, what’s adae wi’ Tam?’

‘Tam? Wha’s spoken o’ Tam?’ Nancy asked in a thin, cutting voice. ‘It’s his mither, puir, ongrateful body! May she ne’er crave a guid bannock tae her diet an’ no’ get it. She telled me tae ma face I couldna mak’ bannocks, an’ a’ the neebours sayin’ oor bannocks are the bonniest i’ Skyrle! I wad I could cry her ben the noo.’

She pointed a long finger in a triumphant way at the cakes on the table, and her lips snapped with a click.

Bab took up her bucket again and went over the footmarks on the floor wiping them, while her face settled into its peace. So long as all was right with Tam, Nancy might quarrel with whom she would.

'An' her a kirk member, wi' sittings on the same side o' the kirk,' Nancy went on. 'Wi' siccan a tongue she'll no hae muckle o' a speeritual experience, I ken.'

Bab's silence was not over welcome to her mother. She lifted herself where she sat, and gazed down at the lassie wiping the floor.

'An' I'm bold tae say she micht hae said waur an' no hae gar'd you fash yersel', Bab.'

'She micht hae said waur,' the lassie made her answer.

'She micht hae said waur?' Nancy cried, her anger rising. 'She couldna hae said waur; an' if you hadna been coortin' Tammas you wad hae seen it yersel'. Hand me oot my kerchief an my Sabbath bonnet. Maybe the meenister will gie me the consolation I canna win fra ma ain bairn.'

'Mither, dinna seek the meenister wi' siccan havers!' Bab called rising to her feet.

'Havers! an' is't Jamie Stewart's dochter that wad see me insultit an' ca' it "havers?" Weel-a-weel, it'll no be havers gin I tell Mr Grahame you'll no' sing in the singin'-pew an' no' sit under his preachin' ony mair. That wull you no'—nor mysel nether.'

'Mither, you winna dae't!' Babbie cried, amazed at Nancy's rough speaking.

'Wull I no?' said the old body setting her lips. 'Hand me oot my bonnet.'

Babbie bided where she stood

'Mither, I canna live wantin' the singin', an' an' Tam,' she said with a sudden new passion sounding in her voice.

'You'll live wantin' the singin' and wantin' Tam as weel, fra the noo onward,' said Nancy. 'I'll no' permit you tae merry wi' Tam Fergusson, an' that's a' about it. Hand me oot ma bonnet.'

Babbie's face was awful white; but she said no word, and fetched out Nancy's Sabbath bonnet, from its box beneath the bed. She smoothed out the ribbons and tied them under the sharp chin her mother lifted. Then she folded the shawl about her, and stood at the door watching as Nancy went briskly down the loaning. All the life died from the lassie's body the while she watched; and her face took on a dull grey, save where the two patches of red burnt themselves in.

It was not her mother that she was watching go from her sight, but the hope and brightness of her life—the hour's singing that

opened Heaven's gates to her, the love that led her right through the open gates. All was fading away from her vision—blotted out by the will of the mother she had feared even more than she loved. She had no spirit in her to think of changing Nancy's temper towards Tam's mother. Nancy Stewart's will was well known in Skyrle—and it was as far beyond human control as measles, or marriages, or any other dispensations of Providence.

Babbie turned back into the room. It was awful clean, and the burnish on the stove shot through her like to sharp steel. The kitchen was redd-up for the Wednesday's happiness—'St Tammas' Day' as she had been used to call it, blushing to herself. She had made the bannocks on the table for Tam's supper; but he would not be needing them that night—or indeed any other night. She set them aside, thinking with a mild wonder of the foolishness of the thing that had taken all the beauty out of the day. And it made her little cheerier to know that her mother was altogether in the wrong. Nancy Stewart could make neither bannock nor scone so as any grown body could eat them; but it was so long since she had given herself the credit of Babbie's baking that

she had grown to feel it was her hand that made the best bannocks in Skyrle.

When Nancy came back from the manse, the set of her face told Babbie all she wanted to know. The lassie said nothing, but her eyes were pitiful-like when she lifted her mother's bonnet.

'Tam wull no' be heer the nicht,' Nancy remarked cheerfully, her temper being the better for her having had her own way in spite of the minister's counsel. 'I telled him you wis in nae mind tae merry intae the family.'

'An' did he say aught?' Babbie asked, knitting her hands and scarce breathing for the pain at her heart.

'He telled me he wis well content tae be oot o' his bargain, an' I telled him you wis the same, an' wad be merryin' wi' a likelier lad than him.'

'Mither!' Babbie cried; and that was her only word at the finish of her hopes. Save that she had no singing-practice through the week, and that she ceased attending the Totum Kirkie on Sabbath, it made no extraordinary difference to her outward life that she had lost her sweetheart.

She kept the house as fine as when Tam

had come ben to praise her for a bonnie housewife. She made bannocks that were more than before the pride and boast of Nancy; but there was no meaning now in the work. It had no love in it, and 'twas like a mockery. When the summer came in, and she saw the empty nests in Fyston Den they minded her of her empty life from the which the hope had flown. She ceased to sing at her work, and she could not go to the town's concerts — she dared not run the risk of meeting Tam Fergusson.

Nancy saw fine that the lassie was wearing away, growing paler, and thinner, and more spiritless, and peaked. And well she heard when the neighbours had it to say that something ailed Bab, and Jamie Stewart had died of a decline; but she closed her eyes and tightened her lips. However, though she said nothing she got a bottle from the chemist in the High Street, and bade the lassie drink the bitter stuff. Babbie took it meek as ever, but it worked no miracle, and only put her off her food. She could not understand Nancy's watching her at her diet, neither the reason why there would be such like luxuries as kippers or jelly to their tea, though they took

it by themselves. But though nor Babbie nor Nancy fancied such dainty ways, there was never a meal but the old body would reach down the jelly and bid Babbie taste if 'twas worth the eating.

And when the winter wore through and the spring came in again, Babbie ceased to cook and to clean and was content to lie in her bed and watch Nancy making a terrible business of seeing to the house.

The old body was past work, but she was too proud to let the neighbours know it; and she broke the crocks, and spoiled the cooking, and wearied her poor bones rather than confess her frailty. And after every misfortune she would set her lips and begin all over again, making double work for herself. And in the meantime Babbie lay in her bed and said nothing. It seemed that the lassie was dying as patiently as she had lived, going out of life without a sign that she would fain have bided in it; but Nancy refused to see her condition. And when Miss Isobel came and with many tears entreated the old body to be reconciled to the Fergussons for Babbie's sake, Nancy closed the door in her face, and bade her see to the buttons on the minister's

clothes. She had said that Babbie should not marry Tam, and she would not go back on her word. So she closed her heart just as she had closed her eyes; and she told Kirsty that Bab had aye been frail and she had never thought to rear her.

And Kirsty sought to soften Nancy's heart, and came about the house, sorrowing greatly for the trouble that was fallen on Babbie. And indeed, had it not been for many an hour's work that Kirsty put into Nancy Stewart's house when the old body was away, the lassie would have been in a sore case with her mother.

It was Kirsty who led Mr Grahame to Babbie's couch; but though he pleaded with her to see Tam she answered him in her patient way that she was content to bide her mother's will. And when the minister called for Nancy and pleaded with her, she answered him the same that she had answered Kirsty.

But for all her pride her face took on a sharp look, and night and day she watched Babbie as if she could not keep her eyes from her though she might deny her even life itself.

And then one day the stubborn old heart

failed her; and she rose and stepped to the couch, and gazed down at Babbie who was in a light slumber. Sleep but heightened the whiteness of her poor face; it was long since the patches of red had faded out, and now the bones stood clear on her pinched features. Her eyes were sunk deep, and there was a shade around her mouth. That shade it was which made Nancy catch her breath with a cry—‘Her feyther went that way, an’ she’s a’ that I hae gotten, ma bairn! ma bairn!’

Two heavy drops fell on her cheeks, but she dashed them off at the sound of Babbie’s voice.

‘Mither, I could eat a bit bannock the day.’

It was the first cry for food she had made for a week past, and hope leaped up in Nancy’s heart.

‘An’ sae you sall, an’ sae you sall,’ she said cheerily, hastening the while to the cupboard. ‘I made bannocks the day. They’re bonnie and new; you’ll eat a bittie fine.’

She came back holding a piece bannock in her hand, and the lassie took it hungry-like. But at the first taste her face changed, and she let the piece fall, while her eyes filled up with tears.

'It's true, mithier,' she said, 'you ne'er kenned hoo tae mak' bannocks.'

'Twas the hardest word Babbie had said in the length of her gentle days, and Nancy's anger rose at it.

'You wouldna hae fancied it, gin it had been a better,' she said shortly.

'Ay, would I,' Bab said weary-like, and turned herself to sleep again.

Nancy stood fighting a battle with herself. Her face worked sadly; the thin lines about her mouth were all broken and quivering. . . . She drew her bonnet out and took a hold on it, as one uncertain. Then she shook her head and set her mouth. 'Na, na,' she said, and would have laid down the bonnet but that one of the strings fell across her arm. It minded her of the day when Babbie had tied them for her, and had folded the shawl round her, knowing the while she was bent on doing her a mischief. Nancy trembled greatly, and she sat her down holding the bonnet in her hand. Then she rose and set it on her head, and fixing her mouth like iron, she lifted her head and went from the house and down the loaning to Widow Fergusson's.

Tam and his mother were at their tea when

she darkened the door, and they rose gazing with amazement at her. Her little body was straight as could be, and there was all the pride of a proud woman in her face. She spoke in a thin, high voice that did not quiver though her breath came hardly.

'I was aye a puir hand at makkin' bannocks,' she said, 'an' I wad tak' it awfu' kind gin you'd gie me the loan o' ane o' your ain, Mrs Fergusson. Babbie is but ailin' an' she's cravin' for a bite o' bannock. An' Tam, maybe you wad come in by tae call for the lassie. She's a tender-hearted creature, an' I doot she's frettin' at the words I hae made atween you baith.'

'Come in by, Mrs Stewart,' said Tam simply, 'I hae been talkin' tae the minister's lassie, an' she telled me I suld call for Babbie again. I'll walk roond wi' you the noo, an' tell her the choir practice winna be the same tae me till she's back again i' her auld place.'

CHAPTER IX

How Robbie Became a Poet

Many a time I've heard it said that the poet is born, not made ; but when I think of Robbie Christie I am fain to question the saying.

To be sure, Geordie Mackay said that Robbie was a poet on the day when—a laddie newly breeched—he told his mother that he heard the lark sing 'The sky, the sky, the sky,' as it mounted up from the field on the brae. But surely had he been born a poet he would have been making bits of rhymes like Geordie and printing them in the *Skyrle Echo* for the other poets to make light of.

No, no ; it was Nan Mackay's love that made Robbie a poet. Had he been born one he would have showed it in his face, and not frightened all the bairns with his uncanny looks, and his shoulders rising above his ears.

Though that last was not his blame, but was owing to a fall when he was a babe.

He was a lad I liked, and I couldn't bear to see his white face, and the look in his eyes that were always hungry and as if praying for what he hadn't got. It was little he had ; for after his mither died, he lived with ne'er a creature to love, and no woman to tend him, though half his days were a long battle with the pain the doctors couldn't cure.

But, he never seemed to weary, although he was grave-like ; and when he couldn't work, he would sit the long day through watching the sunbeams creep about the trees, or flash on the waves by the shore. And always on his face was a strange light, and he would seem to listen to a voice that none else could hear, and see sights that were hid from the folk about him.

Geordie said it was because Robbie was a poet; though I told him had he been a poet, he wouldn't have been silent, wanting the words to clothe his thoughts. For what is a poet but a man who can make a rhyme that the papers will print?

I had never any patience with Geordie's idea that the poet is one who knows the invisible

meaning of visible things. And often he angered me, saying the poet sees the meadows of space a-blossom with stars, and finds a solar system in every cluster of gowans on the brae-side; with such-like upside-down talk.

But though I couldn't be troubled with Geordie's wild sayings, it pleased me greatly when he began to notice Robbie; and one day the thing began that made him a poet.

He and Geordie had been having a turn on the cliffs, and they stood talking outside the door of Widdy Mackay's house in the Abbey Nook. All on the sudden the sneck started, and the door swung backward, showing the kitchen. It was the gloaming, when the lights are dim inside and out, and Robbie had never seen a bonnier picture than the open door showed him then. The fire was bright in the range, and the flames danced on the walls and on the shining lids hanging over the mantel. The bricks had been newly raddled; and on the wool-rug before the fire a cat sat purring loud enough to quiet the kettle on the hob. The brass fender was like gold, and every thing in the room looked as if it was fresh from the hands of the maker. In the corner, near the window, was a chair-bed, on which

Mrs Mackay was propped, her patient hands idle on her lap. Poor body, she hadn't moved a finger for many a year. There was a white cloth on the table, and some blue cups and saucers, and a plate of bannocks that Nan had fired that forenoon. And the lassie herself stood on the far side of her mother; and all about her the flames danced, showing her steady eyes and her soft hair.

And, seeing all this, a great hunger rose in Robbie's heart for the home life he had not known. But ere the longing had time to make itself into a thought, Geordie had taken hold of his arm and had led him into the house.

Hearing the fall of their feet, the lassie came forward, and welcomed him kindly, and took his bonnet, and bade him sit in the big chair in the ingle and warm himself while she infused the tea. She was but a poor creature herself—with delicate health, and waiting on her mother—and it was maybe this that made her take to Robbie when most lassies would have flouted him.

Since his mother's death he had known nothing of a woman's soft ways; and her kindness was such a delight and a wonder

to him, that he didn't remember his bashfulness, but sat watching her with a colour on his face and his eyes shining.

He had his tea with them, and then Nan asked him if he had a fondness for music. And when he answered her that the only music he had ever hearkened to, beside the singing in the kirk, was the wind sighing through the corn-stalks, and the sound of voices in the sea's moan, she gazed at him pitifully:—

'You will tak weel wi' Geordie's piano,' said she, 'and I hope you will no object to my fiddle.'

There was a quaint old piano in the corner, and Geordie opened it; and presently they began to play, the lassie's fiddle following her brother's music like a voice. Robbie had never hearkened to such playing before, and the cry of the violin went to his heart as if it sought to tear some secret thing from it.

He knew there was something there that would fain have answered to the cry, but he could not find speech for it; and he sat with his eyes burning, feeling that his heart must burst if it could not find utterance. He strove and wrestled with the feeling in the same way he had struggled before when he had tried

to tell Geordie the secrets he heard in the woods, and the mysteries he learnt from the waves on the shore. But the words wouldn't come, and at last he laid his head down on the table, and wept like a bairn, for the heart-hunger that couldn't find a voice.

After that, each night he went to the house in the Abbey Nook, and prayed Nan to reach down her fiddle and play for him. And since music was the lassie's life, she was but too happy to please him; and the violin spoke to his heart, till the time came when he could answer. One night—a shy, proud laddie—he slipped a bit of paper into Nan's hand, and then sat down, trembling greatly while the lassie read the verses he had penned.

After a while she looked up with a rare smile on her face:—'Robbie, lad, oh, but you're a poet!'

'Na, na,' he said, humble-like, 'I'm no' that. If I could find the words for the bits of thochts. . . . But they dinna come, an' I'm dumb juist.'

'But, Robbie, this is real bonnie. And it maks me see the Bell Lighthouse as gin I was on the brae gazing ower the sea to it, wi' the haze saft on it, an' the white gleamin' o' the

stances. Bide still the noo, and let me read it up for you.'

And these were the words Nan read—

'Far from the shore as a landman's voyage,
Four-walled round with the four winds' flight,
White were it day as a dove's soft plumage,
A tower uprises, sheer of height.
Strong where is strength from its broad base shaken;
One lurid lamp o'er a moonless track;
Red were it night, and the wild waves waken
Grim wrecker-reefs to their feast of wrack.
Yet white were it day, or red were it night—
And white lips close round a swift-thought prayer,
From two men's hearts 'neath the lamp's red flare—
Plumed for the flight it hath never yet flown,
From the homes and the hearts of a sea-girt town,
A tower uprises, sheer of height.' *

'It's beautiful!' said Nan. 'When the sun strikes the white tower, it's like what you call it, "a dove's soft plumage." An' when the nicht fa's, then you mind but of the red licht ower the watter. An' the Bell Licht is set in oor hearts as it is in the hame o' ilka body i' Skyrle. Robbie, it's beautiful!'

The laddie sat blushing and twisting his hands together too happy to have much speech on his tongue.

* The verses in this sketch are by 'Quill' a native of Arbroath, N.B.

'It's a sonnet,' he said, shyly at the last.

'I dinna care what you call it,' said she, 'but you're a poet, Robbie.'

Well, after that, scarcely a day passed but Robbie had something to show Nan, and having begun to rhyme, it was just a craze with him to turn everything into poetry. He seemed to have put on strange spectacles; for he saw meanings in the most ordinary things, and when he showed them to Nan, it seemed as if she had seen them too, and as if the meaning was greater than the thing itself. It was just wonderful to see the change in Robbie. He had surely lighted on a new world, and wherever he touched it the life sprang up. His face grew to be all eyes and to shine till it was more uncanny than before, and always he seemed burning with the fire of his inward life. The poor deformed body was nothing to him now. He did not seem to think of it, and even his pain opened his eyes to understand the mysteries that had puzzled him.

But while he was feeling his manhood in him, Nan was fading to a pale shadow. So softly and quietly she was wearing away that it was like a snowflake melting, and none of

them saw she was getting frailer and whiter every day. Even Robbie did not see it, although she had grown to be the best part of his life.

He was giving her a young lad's unconscious love, and his thwarted soul was weaving its thoughts round her till they hid from him the white, wae lassie that she was.

It was drawing to the fall of the year, and the harvest was waiting for the sickle. All along the cliff path the fields were yellow; and the trees in Fyston Den had a glint of gold even when the sun did not strike through them.

In the Abbey the leaves were turning; and the chatter of the jackdaws sounded shrill in the silence of the other birds. When the old men sat under the wall at the sunset, they drew their coats round them, and shivered as they talked of the harvest and the winter coming on. The grass among the grave-stones was dry and parched; and here and there a bare patch on the ground showed where death had been reaping.

The bairns played among the graves, or stood spelling out the names on the stones, till they saw Robbie on the path and stood

to watch him. A year since they would have mocked at his poor disfigured body and have run away. But a change had passed on his face during the months; and now the bairns did not mind of the crooked back, and saw only the kindly eyes and the face with the light on it. He was strolling along under the trees, and his thoughts were away in another world, till a wee girlie pulled his coat-tail and laid a rose in his hand.

Robbie smiled down at her, and sat himself on a gravestone and called the bairns round him to hear a story. And when he had ended, he bade them finish their play while he watched the sunset.

The tomb on which he sat was one of the oldest in the Abbey yard, and sitting there with the girlie's rose in his hand, his thoughts led him away into the past, and brought to his mind one of the legends of the old Abbey.

It wasn't a ruin to him any longer, and he could see with his mind's eye the arches up-reared, and the corridors stretching away dark and dim into the shadows. He could see the lights on the altar, and the bonnie carvings round the pillars, and the grand embroideries that hung round about. He

could hear the slow, sweet chanting of the monks, and could feel the smell of the incense in the air around him.

Then the music changed to a dirge very still and solemn, and Rob saw that close under the altar a monk was lying in his shroud, and in his hand was a faded rose.

* * * * *

And at this he started and came back to his senses.

He was still sitting on the stone in the Abbey yard, and his fingers were closed round the flower the girlie had given him. The bairns were singing as they played, and the clouds in the sky were red and gold. The old men in the distance were talking among themselves, and under the Abbey gateway Geordie Mackay was going home from his work.

Robbie waited till he saw him go towards the house in the Abbey Nook, then he followed him bashful-like, for he was wearying to see Nan, and had been biding in the yard for Geordie's coming. Nan was whiter than ever, but he noticed no change in her, for she had cheery words for him that night.

Poor lassie, she knew how it was with him, and she felt the love he had never dared put into words. She had grown to love him herself, but well she knew that nor for him nor for her was the earthly love. And she had set aside her own feeling to encourage him with his poetry, thinking that when she was away he would have his verses to comfort him.

She must have known it was the last time she would see him, for she spoke to him bonnie words of the love that could never pass away in the darkness. And she bade him be strong and humble, and mind that where love was, there was life.

She was soon wearied that night; but ere he went out she would play one of her songs for him, and the lad listened, while, for all she was so weak, her fiddle sang high and clear above the note of Geordie's piano. But when the song was ended, Robbie got himself up, and laid his rose in her hand, and went out with never a word to them. And that night he wrote another poem, calling it:—

THE MONK AND THE ROSE

With just such a light on his face as tips
The sky's far rim when the last star dips,
He lay there dead—closed eyes, closed lips,
Yet looking, they thought, so overwise.

And, stranger still for a monk and old,
In his nerveless hand held closely clasped
Was a withered rose, with what of its gold
Remained of a summer of roses past.

He had treasured it best of his sacred things,
Long years, unseen, in his life's day-book;
A far-off summer scent round it clings,
With a ribbon some one from her fair neck took.

And soft waxed the hearts of these monks grown old
(O love will lurk under years of snows) ;
Some thought of the story he never once told;
And the youngest of all kissed the pitiful rose.

But the rose for a kiss would have nothing to say
That the dead through life as a vow held dear ;
And they might have guessed for a year and a day
And known no more than is written here.

Say, rose, fresh plucked from your niche in the wall,
When death with its gift of sleep dowers all,
For the kiss now given, in the years outgrown,
Be you too dumb as if you never had known.

When Robbie saw Nan again she was in her coffin, and it seemed to him that death had given him what he dared not have craved from life. She was his now ; part of all beauty and all peace, and the life that made up to him for his misshapen body. He saw her in the sunbeam, and heard her voice on the wind, and through the day she spoke to him in bonnie ways.

But when the night fell, then the darkness hid her [from him; and he would go to the house in the Abbey Nook and sit him down and wait, half expecting she would come into the room with her pale smile to welcome him. And when she didn't come, he would rise, sighing, and go out without a word.

This went on till one night, sitting there, he remembered Nan's words, of the love that could not go out in darkness.

But his heart was too sore for the comfort of it, and he said to Geordie that just as they would not hear again the sound of her fiddle striking through the piano's music, so their hearts could not meet in the silence that had fallen between them. And Geordie rose and fell to playing the music he had played with Nannie the night she died.

The fiddle lay dumb on the shelf where she had put it, and the silence of the strings cried to Robbie's heart. Geordie played on till all at once a strange thing happened, and out of the silence where the fiddle lay a high note came answering to the note he had touched on the piano.

Geordie knew how it had happened, but to Robbie it was like the voice of Nan telling

him that love was in death's silence, and would speak to him again. And the verses he wrote after that showed that he had taken comfort from the message.

YESTERDAY'S MIGHT

Standing amid the roses, while a song as of beaten gold
Comes up the path from the river, the river that grows not
old,
I almost see what I cannot see, path shaded by beechen
boughs,
And a light on the blossoming limes like the sun upon
winter's snows.
Ah, the breeze through the green aisle shivers, and the night
grows sudden cold !

In the light that is half the twilight, and half the red firelight
play,
I kneel as I knelt by the altar in yon minster old and gray ;
And I almost hear what I cannot hear, the chimes of a
marriage bell,
With the fond ' God speed you,' ' Happy days,' from the many
lips that fell.
Ah, tears and ashes, and rose-leaves fall in the might of my
yesterday.

You tell me of roses and tears, that they smell of rosemary
and rue,
Can I wonder the beechen boughs that they intertwine with
the yew ?
But, say, when the heart grows weary giving battle to yester-
day's might,

And the glow from the firelight glancing sinks down into
darkest night,
Can a woman be less than womanly, to her true heart prove
untrue?

Still I almost see what I cannot see, and hear what I cannot
hear,
The phantom forms of yesterday with their rhythmic beat
and clear ;
Till in through the hush of the gloaming darts a gleam of
light from the skies,
'Tis the sheen of the emerald portals enfolding my Paradise !
And I turn again to my heritage, humbly to do and to bear.

But that was the last of the verses Robbie penned ; for afterwards he had not time, he said, to be making rhymes when there were hearts round him needing love and comfort. He was no longer a lone man, for it was strange how all in sorrow drew to him to learn the message that had taken the sting from loss and death. And finding himself a help to those around him, Robbie was comforted himself.

But the life in him wore the frail body ; and as the soul grew, the frame withered, and all saw that Robbie was to die. And day by day the love waxed on his face that was a wonder to see ; and when he lay dead, none

remembered his crooked body, seeing his face as the face of an angel.

Geordie held to it that Robbie's life had been a grander poem than any verse he had penned; but however, it was love itself that made him a poet.

CHAPTER X

Crossing the Bar

It was summer in Skyrle. Down at the shore the fishers were busy with the herrings. All along the harbour there were rows and rows of casks waiting to be filled and sent all over Scotland. At the end of the pier the women were cleaning and sorting the fish for the barrels. The men were all about; some in the boats making ready for going out again, some sauntering along the harbour wall with their pipes in their mouths, some leaning their arms on the stones, speaking a word now and then one to the other.

The waves washed at the foot of the walls—a soft ‘lap-lap’ that was surely a blythe thing to hear in the summer gloaming. And the air was full of the sound of bairns’ voices and the smell of the nets and creels. It was the time of the year when Skyrle has more to do with the sea than with the mill. And out in the

pleasant sun it did seem a fine thing to be one of the fisher folk, dancing on bright waves away from the roar of wheels, out of the noise and heat and dust of the factory.

Ay, a fine thing it seemed with the sun glinting down on the boats rocking safe as bairns' cradles beneath the harbour wall. But to them that looked backward at the winter past, and forward to the storm that each green wave carries in its bosom, it was not altogether a fine thing.

Surely it is well to be content with our lot; hearing the song we heard yestreen, though the keen be in our ears the morn—seeing the heavens open above us, though earth has been cloven through by the passing of our dead.

Old Swankie stood leaning over the wall; his pipe in his mouth, his boots covered with little bright scales from the herrings. His eyes were towards the Bell light, the tower standing straight and tall against a clear, gray sky, for his sight was keen with many years' peering through night and storm. He was an old man; his hair and beard like the waves when they break on the brown rocks on the shore. An old man he was, but strong

and hearty, putting to shame many a younger. For all his age he took his place in the boat now as he had done fifty years ago; and did a strong man's work on the sea, and in the kirk, where he was greatly respected. He walked blameless before the town; and up and down the coast from Wick to Newcastle, there was no fisher but knew him for a stern, upright man, sticking to his word as a buckie to the rock.

He looked stern enough gazing out over the sea that summer night; but yet his arms were round a wee bairn that kicked her little red shoes on the wall; and his ears were hearkening to a lassie talking with his old wife Margot over a tub of herrings.

Though a stern man and a silent, he was fine at a song, and in his day had been precentor at the Totum Kirkie. When they got an organ into the church, Swankie laid down a sight of money towards it, although the thing must have been in his mind as not altogether a compliment to himself and his singing. But though he might have a rough way with him, he was not one to bear malice; and once when William Rafe absented himself from the kirk, and there was

none to take the instrument, old Swankie rose in his seat and struck his tuning fork (he never went to a diet of worship without the fork in his pocket), and set the tune over the heads of Geordie Mackay and all the proud singers in the singing pew. But Miss Isobel had a story against him that she told all the folk that came to the manse, roaring and laughing at rough Scotch ways, while she repeated it.

One night at the meeting, neither William Rafe nor Geordie Mackay being present—I doubt they were at cricket on the common—the minister signed across to Swankie to give the tune. The which he did. But coming to the next, which was one of those irregular hymns like a cork-screw, in the new part of the book, he could not think of a tune to it. Mr Grahame waited on him a while; then said he—‘Can you set that tune for us, brother Swankie?’ upon which the old man looked up glowering at the minister—‘Set it yourself!’ said he.

Miss Isobel laughed out then and there to the great scandal of the members assembled; and she never told the story after but she

roared at the minister's face when Swankie bade him start the singing himself.

But this evening Swankie's tune was ready to him, for he had made it himself to fit the verses of one of our Skyrle poets. So while the men smoked and hearkened, and the women ceased their gossip to get the song, he sent his voice far across the water, the waves keeping time to the music as they lapped at his feet.

And this was what he sang:—

' Out to sea from the old red pier,
When the morning is breaking fair,
I gaze, and the lapping of wavelets hear,
And I revel in ocean air.
My heart keeps time with the laugh and spray
As, bearing to seaward far,
The fisherman, silently sailing away,
Is crossing the Fairport Bar.

In from sea on the autumn day,
With the sun on the western rim,
The wild waves hurry and break away
On the lee land—phantom dim ;
And keen through his rigging the tempest sings
As steady the gallant tar
Stands at his post as the vessel swings,
Crossing the Fairport Bar.

I think of youth on the old red pier,
Ere the din of day is begun ;

I think of age in the autumn blear,
When the voyage is almost done ;
And I wonder if I shall as calmly stand
As that weary but dauntless tar,
When my bark is nearing the silent land—
Is crossing the Fairport Bar.*

As he ceased up came the minister and his lassie, Miss Isobel, and the little doggie Skye sniffing about among the bits of fish lying on the pier. The minister held out his hand to Swankie ; and stooped and kissed the bairn swinging her legs on the wall. He was a great man for children, the minister—perhaps because he had never had more than the one—and always had a sweet in his pocket when he met a bairn. So now he gave the little one a toffie-ball as well as a kiss.

‘This is the youngest of your grandchildren, is she not?’ said he to Swankie.

‘Ay, is she,’ Swankie made answer, ‘and Leeb, ower at the tubs, she’s at the ither end o’ them—aucht bairns ; an’ their father awa afore *h/s* father.’

His old face hardened. It was a bitter thing to him to speak of his laddie whose grave was the sea.

* By James Christie, Arbroath.

'And the mother?' said the minister, putting his hand on the bairn's head.

'She went before her man,' said Swankie, and spoke no more.

'And faith follows both, and knows the love that has called them,' said Mr Grahame gently, his face beaming with kindness.

'Ou ay, ou ay,' Swankie made answer.

He was a man of few words, speaking little where he felt the most; but there was a strength in his face that told of inward struggle, and peace that he had gained through strife. Lassie though she was, Miss Isobel understood it; and it was her pity for the old man that made her hold out her hands to the bairn.

'She'll no tak wi' strangers,' said Swankie.

But Miss Isobel had a way with her that none could resist, and the babe was soon happy in her arms. Holding the wee thing to her, she crossed over to the women at the tubs.

'And how are you getting on, Libbie?' said she.

'Fine,' said Libbie. 'And indeed, it's a wonder to see the babba sae guid wi' you, Miss Isobel. Isn't it no, gran?'

'Ay,' said old Margot, without ceasing her work.

'She's good with everybody, I'm sure,' said Miss Isobel laughing. 'And see how jealous Skye is. He wants me to put her down.' And indeed the little doggie sat on his hind legs begging before the lassie.

'No, no, Skye,' said Miss Isobel, 'I can't take you up. Babies are better than doggies, you know. Libbie'—she turned all on the moment to the lassie—'what ails you? You've been crying.'

'Weel-a-weel!' said Libbie, brushing the tears from her eyes; 'it's just granfer, Miss Isobel. I canna thole him to sing that sang. I'm like to greet ilka time I hearken to it.'

'Toots, toots, woman!' said old Margot; 'gin you carried my years you wouldna fash yersel' at a sang. Tears are no easy when the heart's o'er-laden, and when the years are many and ill.'

'What are you afraid of, Libbie?' Miss Isobel asked.

'It was my ain mither, Miss Isobel; the nicht she won awa she had an awfu'-like dream. She saw father an' granfer winnin' to her across the watter. There was a bonnie

light all about them ; they smilin' to see her. An' then it was black darkness, and the watter deithcauld to her puir feet. An' father was drooned a year syne ; and I think whiles, when granfer sings o' crossin' the bar, he'll win tae her by the way o' the sea.'

'Toots, toots!' said Margot again. 'Bide till life has you in its grip, lassie. Aiblins then you'll live mair an' dream less.'

'But I think Libbie is working too hard,' said Miss Isobel very pitiful-like. 'She doesn't get enough pleasure in her life, and so everything seems sad and fearful to her.'

'Life wasna gi'en to us for pleasurin',' said old Margot. 'I hinna had the time these fifty years to speir at mysel' how I'd do gin I lost Swankie. Lassie, I hinna had the time to greet for the five laddies the sea has ta'en fra me.'

'Poor Margot!' said Miss Isobel. 'But, Libbie, you mustn't fret. We are as safe on the sea as on the land.'

'Ay are we,' said Libbie. 'But mony a nicht, I lie wakefu' when the wind's high, prayin' for granfer. An' mony a nicht, Miss Isobel, I canna sleep for the sicht o' him winnin' to father an' mither owre the black watter.'

An' gran, too—though she winna own to it—gran wakes o' nights when the sea's in storm.'

'My slumber was aye licht,' said Margot.

Miss Isobel stooped forward and kissed the brave old woman, and when she rose again, tears had fallen on the face of the babe sleeping in her arms.

Meanwhile Swankie was talking with the minister, telling him about the first harbour built in Skyrle, nigh on five hundred years past, when the monks that lived in the old abbey and the burgesses had the pier sunk and the foundations laid close to where the burn runs into the sea. Many a time since has it been repaired and added to, till now it's a grand harbour, and Skyrle can hold its own as a seaport of the north.

The minister was never weary of talking about the fishers, and Swankie told him of the gallery in the parish kirk where the sea-faring folk sat together, and the sermon that was preached every spring in the wee kirkie in Abbey Street, ere the boats went away to the Baltic. And Mr Grahame bade him tell about the time when they had sent him to London, to speak before the Parliament for the rights of the fishers. And many a bonnie

tale he told of the strange ways of the south, and the happiness he got in seeing the herrings and haddies in the London shops, they being the only kenned faces he saw. And Miss Isobel came near and hearkened, the babe sleeping in her arms, till the lights were lit at the end of the pier, and the stars came out pale-like on sky and sea, and the lonely cry of the gull sounded around them.

Then they called the doggie Skye and turned for the manse, and the minister shook Swankie's hand—"So He bringeth them into the haven where they would be," Swankie.'

'Ou ay,' said the old man gruff-like, but his way was gentle as a woman's when he lifted the little bairn from Miss Isobel's arms.

As they went along the harbour wall, they heard Swankie crooning the last lines of the song,

'When my bark is nearing the silent land,
Is crossing the Fairport Bar.'

But Miss Isobel only heard the sound of the waves lapping against the stones. Into her young life had struck the pain of the lives of others. She was learning the pathos and tragedy of the things folk are used to call commonplace. She turned and looked at

Swankie, and clear against the light she saw his old face, set and rough and strong, with a look on it like the storm and passion of the sea. The wind lifted his white hair, but it did not bend his thin limbs. Straight as the Bell tower he stood, holding the bairn on his arm. And the sight somehow minded Miss Isobel of Death bearing the babe Immortality.

* * * * *

No Skyrle body is ever likely to forget the storm that lashed the coast in the spring of the next year. All round the cliffs the waves boiled, and the ground was white with the strewn blossoms of the surf. The waves dashed twenty feet above the harbour wall, and the spray was driven far up the High Street to tell the story of what was being done out on the cruel sea.

All along Seagate the fishers stood, their women clinging to them with hard faces that could not weep. Now and again a wife would tear her hair and beat her breast, but they mostly stood silent, watching the boiling waves with despairing eyes.

The storm had come down suddenly on

the sea, and fifteen Skyrle boats were out struggling with it.

William Rafe had been to the manse to fetch the minister's lassie; and they two were down at Seagate, watching the storm and straining their eyes for a sight of the boats coming back to harbour. All on a moment Miss Isobel loosed her hold on William; and struggling through the wind and keeping close under the houses, she made her way to two that stood apart, holding to the railings of Jean Wishart's house, their white faces set to the sea. They were Libbie and old Margot; and grief had made the young face and the old like one.

They did not cry or make any sound whatever; but stood gazing out over the water with such eyes that Miss Isobel had no occasion to ask them who it was they were seeking.

'Miss Isobel,' said Leeb, with a thick sound in her voice, 'Miss Isobel, my mither dreamed the truth.'

'Not yet, Libbie,' Miss Isobel cried; 'not yet. He may get back yet.'

She went up softly and put her arm round

old Margot, but the old wife smiled an awful white smile at her.

'Dinna greet, lassie,' said she. 'Twas meet the auld man suld sleep amang his sons. Five bonnie lads the Lord gave to me, and five bonnie lads the sea took fra me. An' noo, lassie, is't a sair thing that feyther and his laddies suld rest thegither?'

But Miss Isobel could do no better than break her heart. 'O Margot dear! don't! don't!' she cried.

'Greet, lassie, if it's your will,' said Margot; 'but there maun be no tears for me. Greet for the woman beside you; for Leeb's lad is awa in yon boatie. Weel may she greet, wantin' him; for she's kenned love nor of man nor of sons. But for Margot, whose heart's been fu', whose men hae a' steppit fra weel-dune wark to weel-earned rest, it's smiles you suld give her, lassie!'

The noble words of the old body only made Miss Isobel sob the more; and all that day, and for many days after, her young face was wet for the sorrow in Skyrle.

One by one the boats won back. One by one; with such lagging steps for the hearts that wearied waiting. And more than one

home was robbed of the mother whose broken heart could not bear the pang of travail following that long waiting.

Two weeks passed; and thirteen boats came back to harbour. The *Margot* was still a-missing, and all felt that there was no hope for the old man and the young lad that had gone out in her on the night of the storm.

Margot bore her loss with a strong heart, but she aged; and Libbie knew that it would not be long before she would be left alone with the seven bairns. And then, one Sabbath, while Mr Grahame was preaching, old Margot arose in her seat in the kirk, and lifted up her white face with a great cry:

‘Do you no’ hear him comin’?’

Mr Grahame stopped in his sermon, and then went on; and Libbie plucked at her gran’s dress, and begged her to sit down and not disturb the folk at their worship. Margot did not heed her, but stretched out her hand to the minister, and stood a minute listening.

‘Do you no hear him comin’?’ she asked again.

At the voice there was an awful-like hush in the kirk, and every face was turned to the

pew where Margot stood, and where Leeb sat with her face in her hands sobbing. Then, gazing right before her, firm on her legs, and straight as on her marriage morn, Margot walked down the aisle and through the church doors alone.

‘Let us pray for one on whom God’s hand resteth,’ said the minister.

When they rose from their knees, the folk saw that Libbie and Miss Isobel, and Kirsty, and one and another had gone after her; and a whisper went sighing round the kirk that Swankie’s boat had come in. How it reached Mr Grahame in the pulpit none knew; but he must have heard it, for he only stayed to give the benediction, and in five minutes the kirk was empty and the whole congregation was away to the shore.

Margot had got there before them, and was on the harbour wall—a gray, lone figure, with eyes fixed on a sail striking round the Bell tower.

There she stood, dumb, heeding nothing but the flash of white; and a silent crowd gathered, and glasses were set, and the harbour tower signalled the Bell, but could not make the name of the boat. But Margot

knew: for though her face was like the dead, her eyes were two flames that saw what the boat was bringing to her. Ay, I cannot doubt she saw the sail spread above the quiet limbs, and the peace of the face looking up to the Sabbath skies. I cannot doubt it. Libbie stood beside her, and Miss Isobel was there, holding the lassie's hand. But none dared touch the one that grief had made sacred.

She was an old woman. and had borne herself stooping many a long day; but this day she stood straight before them all, and the change in her quietened the crowd that else would have been screaming round her.

Larger and larger the sail grew, shining like dazzling silver in the sun; and when the fishers saw that it was making for the harbour a great shout arose up, and the women sprang on the wall, laughing and greeting, and mad with joy.

But Margot stood apart, and didn't heed the noise round her.

Suddenly, over the men's shouts and the women's voices, a fisher cried: 'It's Swankie's boat! It's the *Margot* comin' in!'

Even then old Margot didn't speak; but

her eyes, like two flames, clove the distance and saw what none else saw—just as she had heard what none else heard—the dead man's feet returning home. And the boat, with its sail shining like silver, came gliding in over the bar.

And when it had crossed the bar Margot gave a long sigh, and sank down on the wall, and drew her mutch over her eyes. Libbie stooped, and would have put her arms about her, but Margot signed her away; and the lassie was fain to strain her eyes at the young lad guiding the boat. Then William Rafe, standing beside Miss Isobel, put up his hands to his mouth—

‘Is Swankie aboard?’ he shouted.

‘Ay is he!’ came back over the water; and Libbie threw her arms round Miss Isobel and sobbed aloud; for it was her sweetheart, Jim, that had answered. William moved a step towards Margot to tell her that her man was coming home; but her head was down on her breast, and her eyes were closed, and he wouldn't speak for he didn't understand the meaning of the one man guiding the boat.

The *Margot* was nigh the harbour now, close in under the wall; and a hundred heads

were hanging over watching the lad lower his sail. Only Margot sat still and didn't move.

'Libbie,' Jim cried up from the boat, 'tak' grannie ben the hoose. Dinna lat her see; dinna lat her ken. I've brocht him hame wi' me, but—'

The joy faded from the lassie's face. She ceased her greeting, and turned and bent over Margot. Then she raised her white face.

'I'se no need to hide aught, laddie. She's wi' him the noo.'

CHAPTER XI

Kirsty M'Naughten's Bairn

'Kirsty will sune be getting wedded,' said Widdy Rafe.

'You dinna say sae, mem!' Elspeth Mackay cried, letting her spoon fall into the saucer with a rattle.

'Ay, wull she,' said the widdy.

'Likely she has telled you all about it, mem?'

'Kirsty hasna opened her mouth to me on the maitter. She kens weel I think her a daft woman.'

The widdy supped her tea and looked very irritating at Elspeth, as if she could say more if she would. Elspeth was a timid body; but she had a woman's right to discuss a marriage, and she kept Widdy Rafe to the subject.

'Aiblins Miss Isobel has been crackin' wi' you then, mem?'

'Miss Isobel? Havers! Think you wad I stoop to crack wi' a licht-headed lassie like yon? Na, na. I got it from Kirsty hersel', i' the kirk the day.'

'From Kirsty hersel', Mistress Rafe?'

'Ay, I saw her reach doon the book, and turn up the merriage hymns, and through the minister's sermon—an awfu' powerfu' discourse it was—she sat taking the paittron of Jean Wishart's new goon.'

'Kirsty wadna suit a goon-piece like yon. It's fittin' for a young lassie to wear a flowered delaine, but it's no richt for an auld ane.'

'And who's to say that to her? And who's gien *you* opeenions, Elspeth Mackay?' said Widdy Rafe, with a crook in her voice; for it was true Elspeth was but slow of understanding. 'Who has gien you opeenions on goon-pieces or ony ither maitter? a woman that canna keep a man in his place! But, however, Kirsty has gotten the measurements on her fingers, and it's ten yards she'll be buyin' before she's a week aulder.'

'Aiblins she was but takkin' note o' the goon for anither year, mem?'

Widdy Rafe set her lips very firm, and took a sip of tea ere she answered Elspeth

Mackay, for she was not used to contradiction, and had her own way in the kirk, not e'en the minister ever making so bold as to gainsay her.

'Was it for next year she was suiting her finger to the size o' a ring the while the lesson was bein' read?' she asked scornful-like. 'Na, na. And she keeked at her hand this wey and that wey to see how it wad set her. Ay, her thochts rin on merriages. Ony body nicht hae seen her thinkin' where she should sit in Dawvid M'Naughten's pew the Sabbath efter she is wedded. Ou ay, it's to be at St Tammas's holidays.'

'She hasna sae muckle as gotten a new bonnet for it then,' said Elspeth.

'Toots! I ken fine what like of a one she'll be gettin'.'

'An' dae you indeed, mem?'

'Ay, she'll juist be havin' a fine straw like mine, and ribands like Leeb Swankie's. During the prayer she sattled it all, for when she rose her eyes moved fra my head to Leeb's, and fra Leeb's to mine, though she made as gin the licht in the windy was ower muckle for her. Ay, she is a' theer, Kirsty.'

'She is that,' Elspeth sighed. 'And I

wadna say but she micht hae dune waur than to tak Dawvid M'Naughten.'

'She couldna hae dune muckle waur—a widdy man and aucht o' a family.'

'The puir bairns! And sairly they'll be needin' a mither, Mistress Rafe.'

'You're a daft creature, Elspeth Mackay; but you aye had mair heart than wit. Think you an auld cot like Kirsty wull be a mither to anither woman's bairns?'

'I'm no sayin', mem. But ony woman wad need to be guid to the mitherless. And she's a clever body, Kirsty.'

'I doot she's been too clever for Dawvid, and for the manse people too. Here's the minister sayin' Kirsty's a fine creature that hasna had a chance to show what like stuff she's made of. Havers!'

'They say Dawvid gaes ben the manse each Sabbath nicht, Mr Grahame favourin' the coortin',' said Elspeth.

'Ay, does he? And that's mair than Dawvid's doin'. Hae you seen them at the coortin', Elspeth?'

'Na, mem; I canna juist say that I hae.'

'Weel, indeed, it's a treat! The minister's lassie was telling William aboot it. Dawvid's

juist vera canny wi' Kirsty, and it taks her a' her time to hold him to his baingin.'

'Mem!'

'Ay, indeed. If it wasna for the supper he gets at the manse on Sabbath I doot he'd gie her the slip.'

'An' him the church officer! Deary, deary; but it's a wicked warld! But he winna daur, Kirsty bein' at the manse.'

'Ay, she has gotten him fast, I'se feart. When the kirk and the manse gae hand-in-hand there's few can pairt them. Ou ay, that's how she's keppit him.'

'An' the coortin', Mistress Rafe?'

'The wey o't is this. Dawvid sits doon to his diet—it's an awfu' extravagant manse, a roast ilka Saturday and cold for the Sabbath. It's eneuch to mak Wesley rise fra his grave to stap it!—Weel, Dawvid sits doon to it, and fine he kens what to do with the minister's meat. Syne Kirsty taks the chair that's neighbour to his an' sets her tongue going. "Ou ay, ou ay," says Dawvid noo and again. Syne he slimbers, an' Kirsty cracks awa' for a fu' houer, him noddin' in 's chair. Then the lassie cries them to the parly to worship; and efterwards Dawvid wins oot wi' ne'er a

ward to ony body. But Kirsty's vera weel pleased wi' her man, an' she'll get him at St Tammas's.'

'Weel, to be sure! An' what has Dawvid to say to that?'

'I doot he doesna ken it. But I wadna be in his shoon for a' the toon's siller.'

'Likely she'll be guid to the bairns, the puir lambies!' said Elspeth sighing, for her heart was hungry for the girlye she had lost, and she had room in her love for all the bairns in Skyrle.

'I'm no sayin',' said Widdy Rafe. 'But when a woman's been guid to hersel' for forty years, she's no likely to be muckle guid to ony ither body.'

She poured the last drop from the teapot into her cup. Then she asked Elspeth Mackay if she would have some more tea.

'Na, I thank you, mem,' said Elspeth.

'Aweel there's nane, e'en though you had been for't,' said the widdy, emptying her own cup and turning it upside down in the saucer. She pushed her chair to the one side and took up her knitting. A fine figure of a woman she was, straight and tall for all her sixty years, with a braw white mutch over

her braw white hair, and a pair of eyes that were keen and bright as any lassie's. She was knitting a stocking to William, and you could see by the way the needles moved that she had a stubborn way with her.

'I shouldna wonder though the merriage was at the auld leddy's in Barber's Croft,' said she.

'At Dawvid's mither's hoose?' Elspeth exclaimed.

'Ay, the puir auld body is gey lanesome, and has had nae entertainment syne her dochter's funeral twa year past. She's bought an awfu' grand curtain to the windy. An' she has askit the loan of three wine-glasses. Ay, the merriage will be there juist.'

'The minister winna tak' weel wi't, gin theer's to be wine i' the glasses,' said Elspeth.

'Havers! The minister winna set himsel' higher than his Mester wha made the wine at the merriage-feast. I'm thinking there'll be twa bottles, an' the minister wull tak' a gless fra the best wine—twa and saxpence it is at M'Lean's i' the High Street. It's a braw wine. Eh! I doot Kirsty wull no pass the compleement o' biddin' me to the merriage.'

‘There’ll no be muckle room if the aucht bairns are to be bidden, mem.’

‘Weel, weel, at St Tammas’s Kirsty wull be wed,’ said the widdy very decided, turning the heel of her stocking. ‘And it’s a queer thing what a woman wull dae to get a man o’ her ain. There’s the minister’s lassie noo—’

‘Miss Isobel? Bless her! She’ll no’ be wanting a man lang,’ said Elspeth, taking her up. She would never hear a word against Miss Isobel, who had always been a friend to her. But indeed, it was only Widdy Rafe, who was like to a crab-apple for sourness, that ever said a word to the lassie’s discredit.

‘Wull she no?’ said the widdy, very dry. ‘What like a wife wull siccan a lassie mak to ony God-fearing laddie?’

‘She’ll no mak a wife to ony Skyrle laddie, mem; and although William Rafe is a douce lad, he’s no guid eneuch for the minister’s lassie, wha nicht wed wi’ the best in the land.’

Her own words and boldness make Elspeth tremble; and her hand shook again, when she sought her kerchief and wiped her mouth. Widdy Rafe pushed up her glasses and looked long and straight at her.

'Elspeth Mackay,' she said, in a terribly quiet voice, 'do you ken that you are speaking of *my son*?''

'It's the truth, mem,' said Elspeth. 'An' I'll bid you a guid day. An' I'm muckle obleeged tae you for your hospitalitee.'

'And, indeed, I wadna hae thocht it,' said the widdy.

She did not rise or take the hand Elspeth held to her; and this gave the poor woman such a turn she was fain to go to David's mother's house in the Croft to get her strength back. And it was there she learned that Kirsty was to be wedded from the house at St Tammas's holidays. And Mrs M'Naughten, seeing her so upset, would have her taste the wine she had got for the marriage. She even let her smell at the minister's bottle that David had bought from McLean's and for the which he had paid so much as half-a-crown.

* * * * *

Next to the New Year's day St Tammas's is the greatest day of the year in Skyrle. It is then the mills are closed, and the weary lads and lassies get leave to spend a whole week away from the noise and din of the

factory. And then it is that thrifty folk are wed, and take the week for their honeymoon away among the heather, or maybe among the grand sights of Edinburgh or the southern towns. For many a year the day has been kept; but

‘Wha first ordained this annual tour
Is lost in ages’ misty shooer;
It maybe was some abbot sour
At Abbey holy,
Wha yearly made poor sinners scour
For sin and folly.’

But there’s little of penance now through the days. The penance comes afterwards, when the lads and lassies pay for too great liberty in eating and drinking.

As Widdy Rafe had said, Kirsty was one of those to get wedded that year at St Tammas’s.

It was a grand marriage, but spoiled by the number of people at it; even the manse doggie being invited. Though it is but justice to say that David made the most of his mother’s house, and put a guest wherever there was room for a pair of soles to stand. And this was to please Kirsty, who would have had the whole town present to see her wedded. She wished the marriage at the

manse; but old Mrs M'Naughten was bed-ridden, and was fain to see her son's second marriage, saying it was not likely she would live to see the third. This scarcely pleased Kirsty; but the old lady had a handful of silver to leave David, and was accustomed to say what she would, and to have her wishes attended to. So there was nothing for it but to humour her, and bid the guests to the house in Barber's Croft.

For days beforehand Kirsty was at work in the one room, making ready. And she went so far as to bring the most of David's bits of furniture to his mother's house to make a show before the minister and Miss Isobel. And the room looked beautiful with a bit of carpet on the floor, and a posy wherever there was a jug to put it in. The old lady sat in her bed with a grand shawl on her, and a pair of white cotton gloves; for Kirsty was set on doing the thing respectable. In the other bed, which was just the hole in the wall, they put all the eight bairns, who strained their necks and quarrelled among themselves to get a sight of the company, and the fine bread and cookies

that were on the table with a newspaper spread over them.

The bairns made so great a disturbance that, so soon as David had put the ring on her finger, Kirsty turned and pulled the slide of the bed, and so shut them in till the whole matter was concluded. But she was douce enough ere the ring was on; and when the minister asked her if she would have David M'Naughten to be her wedded husband, she was awful polite, and curtsied to the floor with — 'If you please, sir, and thank you kindly.' The which made Miss Isobel catch up the doggie, and hide her face behind him, while she roared and laughed. Though there's little to laugh at in a woman who is not too proud at getting a husband to remember her manners. And Kirsty was not the one to forget her place, and take a husband with less gratitude than she would show at taking a piece.

There was a deal to do ere David would sign the marriage lines; but Kirsty held him to it, and indeed guided his hand while he put his name to the paper. Then the minister said a few words, and gave the benediction. He had scarcely finished before Kirsty

had turned her gown up (it was the flowered delaine like Jean Wishart's), and taken the paper from the meat on the table, and begun to serve the company.

The minister was wanting to hasten away; but the old lady would have him drink to the health of the newly married. There were just the three glasses, and one was cracked; and in the confusion of getting a sound glass for the minister the cheap wine was poured for him. They did not find out the mistake till he had gone, and then the old lady would have had the ceremony all over again, so as to set the matter of the wine right. And it was not long ere David would have paid half-a-crown for another bottle of wine to have had no marriage at all!

He had been a widow man four years and had got himself into ways that were a weariness to a woman used to a manse; and his wife soon showed that she was not to allow a man's fecklessness in her house.

It was naturally a bitter thing for David to come home to a house that was too clean for him to sit in. Each day it was, 'Dawvid, tak off your shoon,' and 'Dawvid, gae ben the hoose and wesh yoursel', and 'Dawvid, you

maunna pit yer fit on the hearthstane,' till he was like to be driven distracted.

And the bairns made it no better. Even wee Ailie greeted, telling him 'It was aye the Sabbath the noo, wi' clean faces and fresh pinnars ilka day i' the week.'

Between Kirsty and the bairns David had a heavy heart; and when one day Kirsty gave him a clean kerchief on a Wednesday, he just broke down to William Rafe. 'Man!' said he, wiping his brow, 'I hinna kenned ere this what the minister has gotten tae pit up wi'. It's a marvel he can carry a face sae content wi' clean claes ilka day o' the year. It's powerfu' hard on a man, that. Na, na, William, dinna merry wi' a lassie that dwells in a weshtub. Man! it's juist awfu'.'

He wiped his brow again, and sat down under the old clock in the vestry; for it was the night of the class, and he and William were waiting on the minister and the other members. But for all his words, David was proud when his friends admired the bonnie house Kirsty got together in a few weeks. The saucepan lids on the wall were like pictures; and David did not recognise him-

self when he saw his own face in the oven door.

To be sure it was not altogether comfortable when four plates had to serve the ten of them, Kirsty having hung up most of the dinner set on the wall to imitate Miss Isobel's blue china in the manse drawing-room. But there! a man cannot be like the quality without paying for it somewhere.

When David had been wedded a while he had the wit to let Kirsty go her own way, though it irked him to see the bairns with no spirit in them, and to know he was not master nor in the house nor in the kirk. Though he was church officer, Kirsty stood in the porch on Sabbath to see what the folk threw in the plate; and she would even have carried the books into the pulpit before the minister, gin Mr Grahame had permitted it.

So Kirsty went her own way, and never dreamed she was pulling down the family life, while she made a show of building it up. To be sure she fed the children's bodies; but she starved the wee souls, and did not take a mother's place in their poor little empty hearts.

I'm not to say her system did not work

well enough with some of the bairns; but wee Ailie, who was a tender little maid, grew peaked and wan for wanting a loving word now and again. Her father had always made much of her; but after the marriage, when Kirsty got the upper hand, he dare not so much as take Ailie on his knee at nights, for his wife's tongue. She was more than ordinary severe on Ailie; but she favoured the boys, who, needing them, throve well on hard words.

I'm not sure but the life would have killed Ailie if Kirsty's eyes had not been opened to see the emptiness of the little heart. When she had been married a while, a babe came to her; and the wee thing taught her in a month what her whole life had not been able to teach—that love was a better thing than managing a house, or getting the power into her own hands. There was no power left to Kirsty when the babe came to the house, and she just gave in to be ruled by it, like the weakest-hearted woman in Skyrle.

The little child led her into a new life, and she grew soft and tender-like, and would even forget to scold lest her voice should wake

the babe. Eh! how she loved the wee thing! She was even jealous of it, and would not let it out of her sight an hour. The other bairns were all taken up with it, and would sit like mice beside the cradle; and seeing their love for her child, Kirsty's heart waxed kind to them, and so the family drew together. As for David, although he was silent as ever, he was fine and content after the babe came; for now he got leave to please himself, and was not troubled with clean handkerchiefs, or indeed any other clean thing, week-day or Sabbath.

Widdy Rafe was awful sarcastic on Kirsty being the mother of a babe, and many a pointed word she stuck into her advice to her. But Kirsty let her talk as she would. Her sharp tongue was learning silence from the babe's dumb lips. 'Kirsty McNaughten's bairn has dune mair for Kirsty than a' the ministers at the Totum Kirkie,' the neighbours said. And indeed it was true.

So the months went by, and there was a happy change in David's house by reason of a kindly woman in it, when a hard test was put upon Kirsty. A great sickness went

through Skyrle, and three of David's boys were laid down with it.

When the doctor told Kirsty that her babe would likely take the fever if she stayed to nurse the laddies, a terrible cry broke from her, and she snatched up the wean and made as if she would fly from the house. But she was not farther than the door when she turned again, with a noble look in her eyes, though her mouth was all of a tremble. 'Doctor,' said she, 'I canna leave the laddies. I'm a' the mither they hae gotten. I maun e'en bide wi' Dawvid's bairns. Wull the babe tak the sickness, think you?'

He did not know how to answer her, but though his silence cut like a knife through Kirsty's heart, she would not give in to her terror. 'God winna tak my bairn fra me, though I dae my duty tae the laddies,' said she, turning away from the doctor laddie, who, being new to the profession, still had a hold of truth.

After that it seemed as if she could not take her eyes off the babe; but when Elspeth Mackay came in and offered to bear him away out of danger, she just laid him in her arms and turned away without a word.

But afterwards she slapped Ailie soundly for greeting for the wee thing.

Through six days Kirsty bided wi' the laddies, and the very morning when the doctor said the crisis would come, Elspeth Mackay sent word that Kirsty's bairn was not keeping well. I mind the look on the poor body's face when the word was brought her, but she just turned sharp on David. 'Gae you to the babe. I maun bide wi' the laddies till the danger's past.'

Never another word she said; but their own mother could not have been softer with the laddies all that day, and through the night. When the morn broke, the doctor looked frankly into her face :

'God bless you for a brave woman!' said he. 'You have saved the laddies.'

Kirsty made him no answer. She reached down her shawl, and pinned it over her head. Then she spoke very gentle to David, who had come in from Elspeth's. 'Dawvid, my man, Jeannie wull tak tent o' the laddies. I maun gae to my bairn, who'll be needin' me.'

David let his eyes fall, and opened his mouth to stop her. But he could not find

words to say to her the bairn would not be needing her again.

When Kirsty entered Elspeth Mackay's house, little Ailie was sitting holding the dead babe in her lap; and two or three neighbours were talking together as to how David would break it to Kirsty. She stopped on the doorstep as she saw the women, and her face changed. 'Gie me my bairn,' said she, in a voice that went to the heart of each one in the room.

The women gazed the one at the other, and Elspeth stepped forward and lifted the babe from the girlie's knee. 'That is no' my bairn,' said Kirsty in an awful-like voice. 'Where is my living bairn?'

Elspeth fell back from her white face; but little Ailie sprang up and knit her arms round her neck with a great cry—

'O mither! mither! I'm your bairn the noo!'

CHAPTER XII

At the End of the Days

It was well known that the Totum Kirkie was given to changing its minister oftener than any other kirk in Skyrle. Every three years, just when the members had begun to think of liking the minister and to have a notion of what manner of man he was, the Conference put its hand upon him and moved him on. And the members would have been left greeting for the old minister if they had not wanted their sight clear to criticise the one that followed him.

It was a truly irritating system for the Scotch, who are slow to find out the human nature in their ministers, and are suspicious of changes in doctrine; but it had its advantages whiles. To be sure it was greatly envied by the Established members, who had listened to the same sermons for a matter of

forty years, and were like to listen to them for another forty, the little old minister wearing as well as Easthaven salt cod. And I have seen the Free Kirk wearying for a Conference that would take a man from the charge without reflecting discredit on the members that wanted him away.

John Wesley must have known human nature when he ordered the ministers to be moved every three years. I have observed that, although a deal was said to the departing minister about the wrongfulness of the system, the members did not quarrel with it when his successor got among them. But at any rate the arrangement acted like the tide in the sea, and the continual coming and going kept the Church's life fresh and sweet and healthy. Only now and again the tide bears away one that leaves some loving heart broken for his loss.

When Mr Grahame's time drew to an end there was not a member in the Totum Kirkie but would have petitioned to the Conference to bid him stay in Skyrle another three years. There were even some that would have gone a further length, and prayed to have him always. But none took any notice of these,

for they were young things who had not learned caution from their years, nor had much knowledge of the heart's deceitfulness to guide them.

However, when it came to August, and the manse was cleaned down, and there was always a packing-case sitting at the gate, young and old would fain have had leave to keep the minister in Skyrle a while longer; and William Rafe, who, being circuit steward, had a deal to do with the flitting, was chief in crying down the English rule of change, which was not well suited to the northern character. But Miss Isobel just mocked at him. William could not get a serious word from her, and his heart waxed heavier and heavier, poor lad; for she could not care for him, he thought, if she could be so light-hearted at going away from Skyrle.

It was well seen that William had no knowledge of the way a lassie conducts herself when she has a secret to hide.

And then on the last Saturday night Miss Isobel's face changed. 'Oh, I wish we were never to leave Skyrle,' she cried, passionate-like.

‘And what makes you wish that?’ said William bashful-like.

‘It is my father,’ said Miss Isobel. ‘I know he feels leaving this place more than any one guesses. I dread to-morrow for him.’

But the lassie need not have troubled herself; for the next day when the minister rose up in the pulpit one would have thought he was a young man come to his first charge, to see the strength and vigour of him.

The kirk was full of its own members, but it was not crowded, all the other churches being in. However, David had set the benches in the vestry handy; for he knew he would be needing them at night to accommodate the strangers that were always ready to flock about the kirk when there was anything to do. For it is astonishing the pleasure human nature finds in a funeral, or a parting, or any other sorrowful-like thing.

To be sure there was small greeting in the kirk that morning; the most of the members keeping their tears for the night when tears would be expected of them. But here and there the parting lay heavy on one and another. William Rafe at the instrument played

more than one wrong note; and do what she would Elspeth Mackay could not keep a dry eye. But she sat very quiet, and did not put the tears away with her kerchief, being shamed to be the only one in the kirk greeting. For all that she could not escape Kirsty's eye; and Mrs M'Naughten set her kerchief to her mouth and closed her eyes, and rocked herself, to show she had her feelings as well as Elspeth Mackay.

The minister was very plain with his people that morning. He did not trouble himself talking of partings and tears; and he did not quote poetry to prove his sorrow at leaving the church. You would have thought it was a second year's sermon, so frank was he with the members, and so clear on the privilege of giving, and the duty of attending the means.

There were some there that took ill with such plain-speaking. And afterwards there was a great controversy at the kirk gates, the members not being quite agreed as to the person Mr Grahame intended the sermon for. Everybody saw its application to some other body; and, indeed, Widdy Rafe went so far as to say the most of it was suited to

Kirsty, whose failings were open to all, and especially since she had wedded with the church officer.

'Ay,' said the widdy, wagging her head; 'the minister is a wise man. He kens weel the members that mak profession, and the profession that maks members. An' I'm sure I marvelled to see Kirsty M'Naughten biding so still under the truth that maun hae cam hame to her.'

'And indeed, Mistress Rafe,' said Kirsty, speaking loud for all to hear; 'when the minister spak o' a bitter tongue I thocht to mysel' he maun hae veesited you through the week.'

'And indeed he did that,' said the widdy, not taking in Kirsty's meaning. 'And when he bid me farewell I was very faithful wi' him on his duty in his new charge. I doot he's no dune a' he might hae dune i' Skyrle.'

'You're richt, mem. He nicht hae wrought a change in ane or twa hearts that dinna ken their ain hardness,' said Kirsty very direct.

'Weel, Kirsty, *you* should ken, if ony. And what-like manse is yon fleein'-about lassie to leave?'

'You maun speir at her yoursel', Mistress Rafe, and you'll likely be seein' ower the manse yoursel'. I doot William will be havin' a wife to tak that wark fra you ere anither minister gaes oot.'

'Weel, I'll hae a sicht o' a' that's in the manse ere Sabbath first. I doot there'll no be muckle i' the keepin'-room, for yon prood lassie has stayed intil't week-day and Sabbath. It is a guid thing for the manse she'll soon be awa'. She'd hae been the ruin of the church wi' her extravagant ways. Siccan a change frae the carefu' creature that had the manse before her.'

'You're richt,' said Kirsty. 'I mind the haill o' the furniture was destroyed i' her time wi' the damp; she keepin' the rooms lockit, an' no livin' i' them ava.'

'Ay. It's awfu' what a Circuit has gotten to pit up wi',' the widdy sighed. 'If the members didna ken what true religion is, I'm thinkin' they couldna thole the minister oot o' the pulpit.'

She would have said more; but just then Miss Isobel came out of the kirk talking with William Rafe, who kept a dour face and had not a smile for any body. At the

sight of him his mother's face changed; for she was angered that Kirsty should see him too taken up with the lassie to mind of keeping his mother waiting on him. I doubt it was jealousy that made her bitter-like to Miss Isobel, for she was the only body in Skyrle that had a word to say against the minister's daughter. She had never gotten over the sight of the lassie dancing down the street on Sabbath with her little dog; and when she saw her happy ways, frank and daring and open-handed, she just trembled at the thought of William wedding such, instead of a douce Skyrle lassie that would keep the money warm in her pocket.

And, moreover, the widdy was set on his looking where there was silver; and this being so she was not likely to favour Miss Isobel, who hadn't any bawbees whatever, but was only sweet and bonnie, and as true-hearted a lassie as ever stepped.

It is not every mother that has eyes to see good parts in the woman that is to take the first place in her son's heart, and the widdy was more than ordinary blind when William praised Miss Isobel.

'I dinna care aught for qualities that canna

be told i' siller,' she'd say to him. 'Nae guid can come o' a flighty lassie like yon, wi' hair that is a disgrace to ony manse.'

'Miss Isobel is not flighty,' William would answer. 'It's true her hair is bonnie, but that's not her blame, and she is the finest lassie in Skyrle, and has the truest heart.'

'And what can a laddie like you ken o' the mystery and deceitfulness o' a woman's heart, William?'

That was always the way of it. She never seemed to observe that he was grown to manhood, but treated him as if he was in bairn's frocks, seeing in him still the babe she had dandled on her knees. And when she saw him drawing to the minister's lassie she would have had the tawse to him, if she had not had the conviction that he would never marry wanting her consent. He was the best son in Skyrle in his obedience to his mother, and gave in to her whims whether he held with them or no. And it was a picture to see them on Sabbath going to the kirk, she on his arm, awful proud, yet making as if she thought but little of it.

Widdy Rafe was well known in the kirk for a woman of a critical spirit, but true and just

where duty can be reckoned in silver. And after her duty was done, hard and close as the iron chest in William's office at the mill. She was proud too, and had never pardoned her husband for willing the mill-house and furniture to her only so long as William was a single lad. At his marriage she would have to flit to a wee house on the Fairbank road, and she could not bend her mind to that. So she settled with herself that it should be a long day ere she ceased to be mistress of the big house that, overlooking the mill, gave her the opportunity of seeing how William was managing the business.

After the business of the mill, the widdy was mostly taken up with the business of the manse, and could tell better than the minister himself what way Miss Isobel managed the house and treated the furniture. 'And dae you no' ken I'm waiting on you, William, to win to the Abbey yard?' said she at the kirk gate that Sabbath when she saw he was like to follow Miss Isobel into the manse.

'I am sorry I have kept you, mother,' said he absentlike, his eyes on the lassie as she stepped through the garden. Then he gave his arm to the widdy and led her out to the

Abbey, where they halted together beside his father's grave.

The ivy had grown all about the stone, and it covered the text that had been written after the name and age of the deceased. The widdy stood a while looking down at the long grass that was over the grave. Then she would have turned away, saying that old Macleish did not do his duty by the grave, but William stopped her.

'Mother,' said he in a voice that was strange and hoarse; 'you and my father were happy together, were you no?'

'Ay, laddie; I'd none cause to murmur. There's aye crosses in merried life; but he was nae better and nae waur than the maist o' men. But he was sair misguidit when he made yon will that pits me fra the hoose gin you think o' merriage. William—'

She turned on him very sudden, and gripped his hand. 'William, gie me your word as a church member that you'll no' merry wi'oot my consent.'

'You know I won't do that, mother.'

'Ay, but gie me your word here beside your dead feyther.'

'You have it, mother,' said he, very slow.

Then his face was all one colour of red, and he looked at her, bashful yet happy-like. 'And, mother, I know you will be very ready to consent if Miss Isobel will have me.'

'Miss Isobel? That fleein'-aboot lassie that's made you too gran' tae speak your ain tongue? Is it to her you have promised merriage,' screamed the widdy.

'No; I have said nothing to her till I spoke to you. But she knows I love her, and—and she is gaen awa; and I wad fain speak wi' the minister—'

He looked at his mother with a prayer in his eye; but he fell away before the anger on her face, and the slow words that dropped like hot lead on his heart.

'William Rafe,' said she, 'the deid is witness to the word you hae gi'en that you'll no merry wi'oot my consent. And I call the deid tae witness that I'll ne'er consent to your merriage wi' yon lassie.'

'Mother!'

'There's nae mair to be said. E'en although you spak for ever, I would say naught else. Haud awa hame.'

There was no doubt the old body meant what she said. William had never looked for

such a blow, and he could not open his lips to her; but the colour went from his face and the strength from his heart. He did not wish that she should see the change she had wrought on him, and he made an excuse to stoop and draw the ivy from the tombstone, his eyes seeing through a mist part of the Scripture written there: 'At the end of the days.'

And that night Mr Grahame preached from that very same text to the congregation that had crowded in to hear his farewell discourse. If they had thought to have their feelings wrought upon, it must have been a sore disappointment they got that night. Never a word of parting said the minister, but turned the subject to the end that comes to all, showing how what we call the end is but God's beginning. A terribly impressive sermon it was, and there was that about Mr Grahame that hushed through the kirk and quieted the people, so that each one was too solemn for tears.

William Rafe sat thinking of the end of his hopes, his eyes fixed on the manse pew, for he could not take them from the lassie there. But Miss Isobel did not notice him.

She was listening with a grave look on her face, and her eyes lifted to her father, seeing only him in the crowded church. And Widdy Rafe was in her pew holding herself very grim and straight, and with no pity in her heart for the end of her laddie's hope.

There was no gossiping round the kirk gates that night. The minister stood in the porch and shook hands with each one as he passed out; and none did more than grip his hand and go out in silence. But although there was no greeting, and but little to do among the members, it was a more solemn parting than had ever been known at the Totum Kirkie. And the next day, and through the week after, the manse was obstructed with the folk calling. And many a strange gift was offered at the manse during those days, the fishers being extraordinary generous to the minister who had always taken notice of them.

Miss Isobel did not know what to do with all the smoked haddies and red herrings she got; and the sea-eggs and jelly-fish and strange buckies that Leeb Swankie's lad brought to mind her of Skyrle and its fishers.

Elspeth Mackay knitted some hosen to the

minister, and Widdy Rafe sent the lassie a bookmarker with a worked motto, 'Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.' Geordie Mackay had made a collection of all the cliff flowers, pressed and named by his own hand which pleased Miss Isobel greatly; but she said nothing to anybody of the bonnie pictures of the Abbey and the town that William Rafe had sent in a present. Kirsty had been proud to give a family group of David and the eight bairns, and herself behind them in her marriage gown.

And all this love and kindness seemed as if it would break Mr Grahame's heart. He could not rest, but wandered in and out of the kirk while Miss Isobel was occupied with the cleaning of the manse; for although it had been like a new pin for a week past, she was always at it with broom and duster. It seemed that she would not give herself an empty moment during these days, and when William Rafe came into the manse, she could not spare the time even to give him good-day.

So it drew on to the night before they were to leave Skyrle. The minister had wandered out of the study, whose bare shelves made him restless like, into the garden, where there

was nothing to tell him that the time had come for him to leave the place he loved. The rooks cawed loudly in the elm trees, and the doggie Skye ran among the gooseberry beds and pricked his nose with trying to find the berries to which he was partial. The summer was near its end, but the garden was beautiful with dahlias, and asters, and sweet peas, and sunflowers, that Widdy Rafe thought unbecoming to a manse garden.

By-and-by he left the flowers and walked under the shadow of the trees into the kirk, the evening chill striking through the grief at his heart. The quaint-like wee kirk, with its eight sides and diamond-paned windows, had taken a hold of his imagination. 'Twas in that pulpit that death had touched him, and there that he had struggled with life, and weighed the great questions of sin, and doubt, and hope, and faith. Every seat in every pew spoke aloud, taking the voice of the heart that had cried to him for help Sabbath by Sabbath.

In that pew Elspeth Mackay had prayed for the child God had called, and over there Margot had stood listening to her man's dead feet crossing the bar. Beside that

window, where you could see the gorse all a-flower in the manse garden, Sandy Nicholls was used to sit, and the carved chair in the choir had Geordie Mackay's wistful eyes. The pew with the horse-hair cushions was Widdy Rafe's, and he could see her sitting straight and tall, keeping from her eyes the pride she could not keep from her heart. And there was the place where Jean Wishart had stood with Nancy Mulholland's bairn, and a bar of gold from the stained window resting on the babe's forehead.

The minister was truly fond of that window, and liked to mind how each morn the light was red on the text that spoke of justice, and travelled to gold on the words that spoke of love.

Through the smaller windows he could see the sunset clouds over the elms, and he sighed to think of the lessons and sermons he had taken from the trees and the rooks; and when he thought of the little dark vestry where the old clock had ticked through the hours he had spent with God, he needed all his faith to believe that this parting led by the right way.

It was maybe because he had come through

so much in Skyrle that he had that great affection for the place. For I think we have the same feeling for places that we have for folk, and are like to love most those that have touched us at the quick of our natures. But no one, not even Miss Isobel, guessed how the minister felt to leave Skyrle.

The night gathered in the church, but he stood there still. His head was drooped on his breast; and the mournfulness of the end seemed as if it was all about the old man standing lonely in the empty church that was not empty for him. And then he bethought him of his sermon notes that he had left in the Bible, and he dragged his feet up the pulpit steps, and sat down searching the Book for the slip of paper, while he struggled with the weakness that gripped his heart.

It was close upon midnight when Miss Isobel, after long searching, found him there. The Bible was open across his knee, and his dead finger lay on the headline of his notes. *The end is God's beginning.*

CHAPTER XIII

Oor Doctor

When Mr Grahame was taken from the Totum Kirkie, not by the Conference, neither by his own will, but by the Lord himself, there wasn't a body in Skyrle whose heart did not go out to the orphaned lassie he had left. And I'm sure if William Rafe had had his way he would not have been long in claiming his right to lead her home to his mother till the time should come for their marriage. But the laddie was sorely fettered by his promise not to marry wanting his mother's leave ; and the widdy set her mouth fast, and would not allow a word from him in respect to Miss Isobel. Well she knew the wrong she had done the lassie ; and it but made her the harder to the young thing.

It's so whiles that we cannot forgive those we have wronged. And it was that way with

Widdy Rafe. At another time the sight of a lassie left alone without a blood relation to see to her would sorely have fretted the widdy. But, seeing that the lassie was Miss Isobel, who had gotten the first place in her son's heart, all her pity was changed to bitterness towards her.

But indeed her ill-will against Miss Isobel brought a punishment to herself; for it was little pleasure Widdy Rafe got in the minister's burial, not being able for a tear when every one in the kirk was mourning for him.

And it was the same at the sermon that was preached for him the Sabbath after; for, although she held her kerchief to her eyes, she couldn't rightly greet for him with a heart hard against his lassie.

But, however, Miss Isobel wasn't needing Widdy Rafe to befriend her; for there wasn't another house in Skyrle but would have been proud to open its doors to her. And the very day Mr Grahame was taken from the manse to the Abbey-yard, the doctor, who had always been a friend to the family, led her to his wife, saying, their home was hers for so long as she would give them the pleasure of her presence in it.

The doctor had been very well liked by Mr Grahame. He had come backwards and forwards to the manse since ever the minister had had his illness; and, although he didn't belong to the Totum Kirkie, every member of the church had a high opinion of him for his friendliness to the manse. He was but a young lad—not thirty—but he had a great hold on all in the town; but especially on the fisher-folk, who, man, woman, and child, loved the very ground on which he stepped.

I mind ywell his frank ways, and his open face with its rare bonnie smile and its kindly blue eye. It made the day more cheery-like just to see him stepping over the cobbles in the street, with a word for one and a smile for another, and a pull of the ear for the bairns; and no sorrow or trouble escaping him, for all he was so blithe.

He was an awful man for the sea; and when he was not with the sick, he was down at the shore, sitting on the edge of a boat, baiting the lines or mending the nets with the fishers. Or maybe he was in his own bonnie boat, as happy as a gull on the waves.

It was wonderful to observe his love for the sea and all things belonging to it; and his

pocket was always full of stones, and shells, and bits of weed that were a sore burden to his young wife. He could name every plank in Skyrle harbour; and well might he do so, for many a time would he give a help in painting and cleaning when the fishers were making their boats neat. And when he was not busying himself with the boats, you would see him with his breeks turned up seeking out the sea-flowers and such-like in the pools among the rocks. Every pool about the shore and at the cliff-foot he knew; and he would lead the bairns to the spot where the bonniest weed floated, or show them where to gather the finest dulse in all the place. He thought a sight of Geordie Mackay, and Sandy Nicholls, and Robbie Christie, who were all daft about the sea; and he lent them books that just made them dafter than before.

What a fine lad the doctor was, to be sure! And what a comely sight it was to see him with his young face, sitting on the harbour-wall talking with Robbie George, and Jock Swankie, and the rest of the old men; and himself as free and hearty as though he was a fisher-lad. And he was that; al-

though when he stood beside the sick you would have supposed he had gotten never a thought in his head that did not run on pills, and bottles, and bandages, and the like. He was just very tender with his patients; and many a poor old body in Skyrle was content to die if she had a hold of his hand. It was the same with the bairns, who took well with their sickness if the doctor came in to frolic with them, and make a play of the nasty bottle he was for giving them.

There were fifteen doctors in Skyrle; but he never got his own name, and up and down the country-side he was just 'Oor Doctor.'

It seemed but right that he should take Miss Isobel away from the manse; and the lassie was willing enough to go with him who had always been a friend to her father. And she had not been long in his house ere her thoughts were drawn from her own trouble by the sickness that visited the doctor's wife and their bairn, wee Donald, the apple of his father's eye. All in a moment the two were stricken down and Miss Isobel turned to be the help and comfort she always was where [there was distress.

The doctor said but little, and just went among his patients as before ; only there wasn't a moment that he was in his house that he didn't give the boy, who all the time was greeting for his father, and couldn't bear him from his sight.

The mother, a poor, delicate creature, was not seriously ill, but weak and ailing, and couldn't quit her bed to nurse the sick bairn. And one night the doctor sat himself down beside the laddie, saying he would not leave him again till the crisis was gone by. His wife, sorely put about, was laid in the next room ; and Miss Isobel watched beside her, while the doctor sat with his eye on the bairn waiting for the turn of the fever. It was a still night, close and hot for October ;] and as the hours wore by, bringing the time nearer when it would be settled if wee Donald was to live, you could see the big drops of perspiration sitting on the doctor's brow.

He had but the one bairn, and in the four years the laddie had grown deep into his heart.

He stood fanning the boy ; but all on a sudden he stayed the fan, listening. A puff of wind had blown through the open window,

and there was a stir in the air that told him a storm had come on. It was one of the sudden squalls that break sometimes on the coast, and in ten minutes the wind would be rushing overhead, and beating up the waves at the harbour's mouth, while the water would be dashing in white wreaths over the wall. The doctor gave a thought to the fishers, hoping they hadn't put out for the fishing that night; and then he turned him to the laddie who was each minute drawing nigher to the turn of the fever.

He was kneeling beside the bed, holding the wee hot hand in his, when a great ringing of the surgery bell sounded through the house. In a moment he was up and at the window, and had put out his head to see Libbie Swankie holding on to the railings down below.

'Haste ye, doctor,' she cried to him. 'Haste ye! Come awa' to the shore. The boaties are a' oot, and there isna a man i' Skyrle to pit oot the lifeboat.'

'Bide there while I come!' he shouted back to her, greatly excited. He was for going straight away to the shore; but when he drew his head within the room again, he

gave a groan. For how could he go to the shore and leave his bairn to battle alone with the fever?

I cannot tell you the struggle that went on in the doctor's heart while he stood beside the fevered body of his bairn; but, however, it was soon past. With a terrible stern look on his white face, he stepped softly to the next room, where his wife was sleeping, Miss Isobel watching her, and cried the lassie to him.

Then he took her two hands in his own.

'Isobel, I must away to the shore, and the fever will soon be at its height. Will you see to my boy? I'll tell Angus to come in. You know what is to be done.'

'Yes,' said Miss Isobel.

'That's a brave lass! Send nurse to my wife. Don't let her know.'

With that he was down the stairs three steps at a time. Outside the house he took a hold of Libbie's hand, and the two together struggled against the storm that seemed bent on keeping them from the shore. On the way to Dr Angus's house as well as might be for the roar of the wind, Libbie told him how the boats had gone out the

same as ordinary early that morn; and how there wasn't a man left in harbour to take out the lifeboat to the fishers' help. And the doctor hearkened with his lips set tight; for above the roar of the storm and the voices of strong men in peril he could hear his bairn greeting for him.

When they got to the little bridge over the burn, the force of the gale was like to drive them back; but Libbie was a stalwart lass, and could hold her own as well almost as the doctor.

The waves were dashing over the wall, but a handful of men and women stood at the end of the pier, wringing their hands and shrieking high above the wind. Not one boat was in sight, and the sea boiled and churned at the foot of the wall and all along by the cliffs. It was a thing to make the stoutest heart tremble; but for them that had son or brother or man out on that stormy sea it was a thing to drive the life from the body.

When the women saw the doctor running to them under the shelter of the wall, a great cry went up from them. And one and another ran forward, and held him by the feet and hands, crying to him that their men were in

peril, and there was none to save but himself.

They had gotten out the lifeboat and pulled it nigh the steps; and there it was tossing up and down and never a soul to man it.

The doctor cast a sharp look round him at the women and the few men that had gathered beside them. 'We must have out the boat,' said he. 'Who is going in her?'

At that the men staggered, and never a one offered to go. They were mill hands, and it seemed to them a mad thing to venture out in such a storm.

'Likely the boats have made harbour further north,' one of them muttered. But he was stopped by the doctor, who spake an oath that was surely a prayer, and leaped on the wall, with his hand pointing to where, beside the Bell light, a black speck showed a boat making for Skyrle.

Before they could well take in the meaning of what they saw, the doctor was in the lifeboat making ready to put out. 'Are you Skyrle lads, and afraid of the sea? You know I can't work the boat alone,' he sang out to them. But still the men held back. Then the group of women parted; and a

fisher lassie struggled down the steps and jumped into the boat beside the doctor.

‘No, no, Libbie,’ said he. ‘You’re a brave lassie, but a woman is no use in a sea like this.’

‘Let me gae, doctor,’ she sobbed. ‘My Jim’s awa’, an’ I canna bide here an’ lat him droon.’

‘No, no, lassie,’ he said again. ‘And we’re no needin’ you. Look! here they come. I knew Skyrle lads had pluck enough for anything. Out you get, my woman. You’ll only hinder us if you stay.’

Libbie looked up and saw six men coming down the steps, their fists in their pokes, their faces set like men that knew what was before them. They got into their places, and the lassie stepped out. Then the doctor gave a cheer for Libbie Swankie, and the boat felt her way round the wall and through the harbour mouth, the doctor guiding her. But it was a terrible sea, and ere they were over the bar it was known that they would never bear to the other boat.

A great crowd was gathered on the pier by this time, and the screaming and cries of the women were terrible to hear, for they saw

fine the lifeboat was of no use. No men could pull her in such a storm. She wouldn't answer to the helm, and after a while the doctor let her drift with the tide, trying to set her for Skyrle. And then a sair thing befell, and in sight of all watching, a big wave broke over the boat and bore three men away. There were two that were not seen again; but one rose close to the boat, and the doctor got a hold of him, and held on till they pulled him into the boat.

It was a long ten minutes ere they got the boat in; but the doctor wasn't rightly landed ere he was shouting to man a trawler that was in harbour with steam up, and had been starting out when the storm came on. But there was none that would go with him now. Libbie Swankie was on her face on the ground, and the sight they had seen kept the other men from offering. But the doctor was not to be stayed. He leaped on the trawler and saw to her being ready for sea, and then he shouted again if none would go with him.

And then Geordie Mackay, with his thin frame stepped in. 'I owe my life to you, doctor.

I may well spend it wi' you. I'm no sailor, but I can stoke,' said he.

And just then Robbie George, one of the older fishers, who had been in his bed a week with rheumatism, came halting along the wall and settled himself in the trawler with his face glum and never a word to anybody but the doctor.

'The boat's weel manned that's gotten you aboard her, doctor. Haud awa' the noo, lad.'

And shouting again cheery-like, the doctor and Georgie Mackay and old Robbie got the boat out of harbour and fair set to the one that was labouring in the sea.

None will ever rightly know what the three went through that morn. But it was a bonnie thing to see the doctor making the lifebelt fast round the old man, tying him to the stern-post and rigging up a bridle to work the helm with, ere he would see to his own safety. And well it was he did this, for another big wave bore over the boat, and Robbie would have found his grave in the water but for the ropes that held him fast. Georgie was down below, and the doctor himself was swept over the side, but he had

gotten a hold of the wire stay, and he wrestled till he won to the deck again.

And so, with many a struggle, and many a prayer, they bore nearer and nearer to the wee boatie, and at last got nigh enough to take the fishers on to the trawler. There were five of them grown men, and Libbie Swankie's lad beside, and they had made up their minds for death.

They did not put back to Skyrle at once, but beat about seeking for the other boats. They had no sight of them, however, for they had gotten into safety ere the storm broke, and they won back to Skyrle as soon as the sea calmed.

It was a weary work getting the trawler back to port, but the doctor would not be discouraged, and at last he brought her in. And the minute he set his foot on the stones of the harbour the women were like to make a god of him that had saved their men. He wouldn't bide with them, however, but got away and made for home, running along the streets like a daft man.

He had done his duty by the fishers, but the father's heart in him was crying aloud for the bairn he had left in peril.

The house was awfully still when he got in, and he stood in the entry fearful to mount the steps. And while he waited there Miss Isobel came down the stairs and smiled into the wae eyes he lifted up, and signed to him to be quiet.

‘He is sleeping beautifully,’ she whispered. ‘The crisis is past, and he will live.’

Then the lassie turned herself and went away again; for the big doctor had laid his hand on the balusters and was trembling like a woman.

CHAPTER XIV

Nannie

Willie Murgatroyd wasn't the lad to beg and pray of a woman to have him, yet he wrote to Jean Wishart two years after he had left her, asking her to give up the bairn and go out to him.

Nannie was a wee toddle then, and it seemed as though Jean's life was bound up in the child's. She was as proud in her way as Willie. She wouldn't crave a favour, and she wouldn't leave the bairn; so she wrote a short 'No' to his prayer. And after that Willie turned to his work and thought no more of love. And Jean wrought harder in the mill that she might forget him, and because of the wee thing depending on her.

So Nannie grew up, a bonnie bit flower, but with an awful high spirit. You could see it by the way she looked at you, frank, and

daring, and free, yet dropping her blue eyes and turning away, shy and proud, when she saw you noticed her. There was a look of Jean about her; and when she was twelve past, you would have thought it was the lassie Jean come back to life again. Nannie was just as tall and straight and bonnie; and her face was high and proud, minding me of Jean the day she stood in the kirk to have the bairn named.

Kirsty always said it was Miss Isobel that taught Nannie her strange ways, daring and shy all at once; for she was often at the manse, and Miss Isobel was full of spirits and fun, yet had a way with her that kept folk from being too pushing. However it was, Nannie was a handful for any woman, and specially for one who hadn't had marriage to sharpen her wits; and if Jean hadn't been braced up through falling out with her lad, I doubt she would never have curbed the bairn's spirit. But I think all are not sent to the same teacher for wisdom; and some of us learn the meaning of life by pain; and some by the joy that makes the heart unfold like the gowans in the sun in the summer-time.

Kirsty held that it was she that educated Nannie; for she was always scolding the lassie and dragging her up by the wrong end, as she did her own bairns—who would one and all have gone wrong if it had not been for David keeping them straight when Kirsty was away teaching the neighbours their duty to their children.

Well it wasn't long before we saw that Jean's work with Nannie would soon be over, for more than one Skyrle lad was wanting her; and on summer nights the road by the shore was taken up by young lads strolling past Jean's house and casting an eye round for a sight of Nannie. But none could say it was the lads' blame for wishing to walk along Seagate in the gloaming, it being a bonny part of the town and a near way to the cliffs. The house faced the sea; and when the tide was out, it was fine to see the rocks all brown and red and gold with seaweed, and little pools among them, and the fishing boats drawn up on the shingle. And even at night it was bonny with the sea stretching out, dim and mysterious, and the red light from the harbour tower flashing over it like a vivid dream across a sleep. And, moreover,

it did no harm for the lads to go by; for Nannie was always reading love stories and hadn't a thought to spare for the real thing dressed in serge breeks.

It was when the lassie was turned sixteen that Kirsty was curious to explain a change that came over Jean. She had been close and silent, living to herself, since she had had the bairn and had parted from her lad; and her face had grown strong and set, as though she had a secret locked away somewhere behind it. But quite sudden-like her eyes began to soften, and her face changed, with a look on it you notice in the woods just before the spring comes in; and Kirsty said to herself, 'Jean must be courting.' But though she watched and made errands to Seagate most evenings, there was never a sign of any lad seeking Jean. If she had thought, she would have done better to go to Miss Isobel (she was aye Miss Isobel to Kirsty, though by that time the lassie had taken another name); for she would have seen by her face, after Jean had been calling, that good luck had come to her. And so it had; for Willie Murgatroyd had sent Jean a letter saying he had kept single for her sake.

He was a rich man now, and was winning home to see if she had forgotten him.

As you may think, Jean had not done that; and so she wrote and told him; and then set herself to count the days before his ship was due in, telling none but Miss Isobel that Willie was hasting back to wed her.

His boat came in a week before the time; and, without writing to her, he took the train and hastened down to Skyrle to see her—for, now that his love had broken from his pride, it was like the Luman in flood, and rushed over him, carrying everything before it till he could think of nothing but the lassie he had given up so easily sixteen years before.

He had carried her picture in his mind, and he could see her face bright and sunny, and her hair tossed about her forehead, and the proud set of her neck, and her slim young shape. He forgot that the years that had made a bearded man of him must have changed her too; and he never doubted that he should see the same lassie he had left when he went away from Skyrle. When he stepped out of the station, no one recognised him, and the faces he looked at were all strange and unknown; but the streets were

the same, and the names over the shop-doors, and he hurried on to get to Seagate.

When he reached the house it was near the gloaming, and he opened the door without knocking and walked into the room. A young lassie sat in the ingle reading by the firelight, and she started up when he came in, and gave a little cry. For a minute he stared at her, shading his eyes so as to see better. Was it Jean?

Ay, surely. Jean herself, but bonnier than he remembered her. She was looking frightened-like, her eyes were growing bigger and bigger, and her face was red as she felt his look on her. At last he could bear it no longer, his heart was over full, and he stepped forward and caught her in his arms, crying—‘My bonnie lass! My own love! My wee wifie!’

Nannie would have flouted any Skyrle lad that dared to do the like to her, but her head was full of English love stories; and Willie was so handsome, she just thought he was a gentleman come to marry her and make a lady of her. So, though she trembled and drew back, she didn’t rightly discourage him,

but let him hold her hand and lead her to her seat.

'Sweetheart,' said he, looking very tender at her; but before he could get further the door opened, and in came Miss Isobel and Jean. The blood left Jean's face as she saw who it was sitting there, but she hung back, for Willie made no sign, staring as if he didn't know who she was.

'Aunt Jean,' said Nannie, rising in a flurry, 'Aunt Jean—'

Then Willie's face changed and he rose too, putting out his hands—'Is it you, Jean—you?' he asked, dazed-like.

'Ay, Willie,' she said, lifting her face all glad and shining to his.

But he didn't kiss her, neither offer his hand.

'Who is that?' he asked, pointing to Nannie.

'That is my lassie,' Jean said very proud, 'the wee bairn Nancy Mulholland gave to me.'

Willie sat down and wiped his face with his kerchief. 'God help me!' he said very deep and low.

They were all silent after that, gazing at

each other, then Miss Isobel turned to Nannie—‘Will you walk as far as the Abbey with me, dearie?’

Nannie would fain have stopped in the cottage with this man that said he loved her, but she was too much in awe of Miss Isobel to say her nay. So she put on her shawl and went out with her, leaving Willie to use himself to thinking of Jean as a worn, pale woman, and not a bonnie lassie at all.

Well, it's natural for a man to like better a bonnie face than a true heart, so when Willie's thoughts turned to Nannie, it was only what was to be expected. But, eh, it was a pity for Jean that everybody in Skyrle knew as a rare fine woman, to be set on one side for the child she had given her life to. We had seen her change from a light-hearted lassie into a fine, deep-natured woman, true and loving for all her silence; a friend to all, yet yielding her life to Nancy's bairn, and sharing her troubles with none but Miss Isobel, who had a big heart as full of other bodies' sorrows as the cushion is of pins that's set for the baby coming home.

Willie was often at the cottage after that night; very grave and quiet towards Jean,

but smiling and kind to the lassie who didn't doubt but what he was courting her. She, poor bairn, had never heard of Jean's lad; and there was nothing to show that he had a thought of Jean, for he kept himself still, and said no more of marriage. But I doubt she would have heard the story by that time, if it hadn't been that Kirsty was staying beside Ailie in the north, and there was none else to tell her, Jean being too proud to say Willie was her lover when he spoke no word to her.

So Nannie thought Willie was taken up with her, as indeed he was; and she grew to love him and look for his coming, and a braw light came into her face, and all her pride went under the shyness that made her sweet and gentle and winsome. And Jean noticed nothing, for her heart was sore that the love of her life had come back to her with its sweet turned to bitter. And indeed Willie was no braw lover to her with his silence, and his stormy nature all fretted by the passion he had for Nannie and the wish to be true to Jean. If the lassie had not been there his heart would have gone back to his old love. But it irked him to see her stern,

and pale and patient, and so unlike the bonnie spirited Jean he had thought on for sixteen years; while Nannie sitting beside him was the very picture he had in his mind.

The day Kirsty came home she saw how things were going, and went in to tell Miss Isobel she doubted Jean's lad was courting Nannie Mulholland; and she, for one, would be fine and pleased to see Jean well rid of the lassie who had been a handful all these years, and needed a man to break her spirit.

Miss Isobel said never a word but to warn Kirsty not to do a mischief by spreading such-like gossip. But her heart was heavy for Jean, who was a sister to her, and she went round to Seagate that evening to see if Kirsty was right; and as soon as she was in the room she wondered how she had been so blind as not to see it before.

There sat Jean pale and hard, yet patient-like, as if she expected something; and there sat Willie with his eyes fixed on Nannie, who was by the fire with the colour coming and going on her face, and her eyes shining, and a great happiness, like a rosy mist, all about her.

Miss Isobel's heart just broke to see the

work before her, for she loved Nannie as her own; but her duty was clear, and she would not shrink from it. You'd never have thought, seeing her enter so merry and laughing, that she had a great load on her; and as soon as she was in the room, it seemed as if she had brought the sun with her.

She gave Nannie a kiss, spoke a bright word to Jean, and threw a joke at Willie. Then she sat her down and began talking of the time when they were all young together, and in the same class at the Totum Kirkie; and from one thing to another went on to the days when Willie and Jean were courting, and Jean was the best and bonniest lassie in Skyrle.

She was surely a fine lassie, Miss Isobel, and clever, for she bided there an hour bringing up old tales that made them now laugh, now greet, till they were all back in their youth and had clear forgotten Nannie. And remembering that time Willie's heart grew soft to Jean. The talk had made her cheery-like, and her face was young and gay when she laughed with them; and more than once she blushed, shy and winsome as a young

lassie, when Willie spoke of the days when they first loved.

Before the hour was ended they had drawn together again, and he had found that the woman Jean was the lassie that had won his heart as a boy.

Then Miss Isobel rose suddenly, and said she must hasten home, and would Nannie walk back with her. She, poor lassie, was glad enough to get away out into the fresh air from the pain that lay like a wounded thing in her heart. And as they walked on, Miss Isobel, not seeming to notice how quiet Nannie was, began to tell her of the girl that had given up her lad for the sake of a little motherless bairn.

‘And think how sad it was, Nannie,’ said she, stopping in Barber’s Croft. ‘After long years his heart returned to his old love, and he came back over the sea to marry her. But the little baby had grown into a maiden by that time; and when he saw her his love wavered between her and the woman who had loved him all her life. The girl cared for him, he could see; but he could not make up his mind to take her when he was bound to the woman; so he let things slip, and every

day he found it harder to do the right thing. And then, Nannie, and then—the young girl found out what she owed to the woman who had given up her life for her sake; and she was very true and noble, and she had strength to make the hard sacrifice; and—'

'Yes?' Nannie said husky-like, when Miss Isobel halted, not being able to go on for sobbing.

'And—and, she made up her mind. Oh, my dearie,' said Miss Isobel, throwing her arms round the lassie: 'Oh, my bonnie Nan! what did she make up her mind to do?'

Kirsty told me afterwards how they had stopped right under her window, and she heard the whole talk, and saw Nannie draw herself up straight, and lift her face, smiling, but white as the dead, to Miss Isobel. 'Miss Isobel, Miss Isobel,' she said, and her voice had a sound in it like the shudder of the waves falling back over the pebbles when the tide is going out; 'Miss Isobel, will you take me away somewhere where I may stay till—till they are married?'

CHAPTER XV

The Minister's Leddy

In the far corner of the Abbey-yard there is a place where the wall is overgrown with green, in which at the spring you may often find maybe one nest, maybe more. The wall is rarely old and crumbled, as may be seen where the green is cut away round a stone that the minister had a great fancy for. It is carved quaint-like with uncanny things, such as skulls and cross-bones that are mouldering away and falling to pieces. But Time hasn't set his finger on the words that run on the top of the stone: '*I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord.*'

The letters at the foot of the stone have crumbled away, and but one word of the text is left—*Love*. Mr Grahame was used to say he saw a meaning in the chance; for the salvation for which the living wait they will best find in love.

It is just under this tablet that the minister is buried; and you can tell where he lies by the flowers that are always on his grave. There is nothing else to mark the spot; but it is never forgotten by any member of the kirk. And still on a Sabbath eve—though years and years have gone since first he was laid there—many will stroll into the Abbey-yard and stand by his grave, and speak of his beautiful life, and the strange way of his death in the Totum Kirkie; and the bairns still weave their crowns of gowans and berries to put on the minister's grave, as their forbears did before them.

Mr Grahame had been laid to his rest but three months when Miss Isobel left Skyrle, and went to stay in the south with an old lady that had sent for her whenever she heard that her father was dead. I doubt it was an awful-like place for a young lassie, the lady being one of those spinster creatures that are like to the dry apples at the grocer's with all the juice pressed out of them. By all accounts she was just a piece of leather, no good but to lash folk into rebellion, yet the lassie agreed well with her. The most of her time was passed in washing and tend-

ing a fat doggie who was too fat to wait on himself, but not too fat to quarrel with Skye. And this minded Miss Isobel of folk that never grow too frail to be spiteful. For the doggie was the picture of his mistress in many ways.

But, however, the lassie made the best of her life, writing to Skyrle cheerful letters and having her laugh whiles at the doggie, and whiles at the old lady, whose kindness was like the fruit grown in foreign parts that aye has a thorn set inside it. But although she laughed, Miss Isobel sighed often at the pathos of the poor barren life. And she learned the story afterward; how her father had been to marry with the old lady in days gone by; how she had kept single for his sake; and at his death had sent to make a home for the child of the woman that had parted her from her lover. And that was surely noble of her; and is a proof of the kindness living in many a heart that seems to be withered and sour on the outside.

I'm not to say Miss Isobel took well with the life. It was a sore thing to be parted from her father's grave, and the sea and the cliffs and the Abbey and the common; and

in each letter she wrote, she mentioned her wish to return, and told how she wearied for her friends at Skyrle. But if she wearied for them, it wasn't more than they did for her; and at the diets of worship the manse pew would bring tears to the eyes of many. It was a heavy thing to miss her bonnie face; but it was a woeful thing to see no less than nine towsie heads crammed each Sabbath into the manse pew. And Kirsty said it was a judgment on Widdy Rafe, who hadn't done justice to Miss Isobel, that the manse carpets were overrun with bairns; and that the kirk was aye being called on for now a new cot and now a new cradle to accommodate them as they came. Kirsty had a deal to say about it; and each Sabbath the talk outside the kirk was not of the minister's sermon, but of the minister's bairns, and the marvel it was that such a godly man should be so sorely chastened in his family. And it was edifying to see the members wagging their heads, and seeking out the uses of adversity that didn't touch them. William Rafe couldn't like the manse without Miss Isobel; but, being steward, he did his duty, and went about it. And presently he was

extraordinary agreeable to the minister's lady, for she told him that now and again she had a letter from Miss Grahame.

It was after that that Widdy Rafe had occasion to murmur at William for the new furnishings he put into the manse. But the laddie gave her leave to murmur while he sat by the manse hearth, and let the bairns work their will with him so long as their mother would talk of Miss Isobel. And more than once the bairns fell sick through eating of the Skyrle rock he gave them to quieten them while their mother talked.

She was a thin, eager woman, whose nose went before the rest of her face; and she wasn't over well liked after Miss Isobel—especially as she took ill with the manse, and was always complaining of the things that were not in it.

Geordie Mackay had it to say that she always had a letter from Miss Isobel when there was anything needed for the house. But Geordie was one that had questioned human nature so long that he couldn't see it without a crook. However, the remark struck both at the lady and at William, for by this time all knew his liking for Miss Isobel, and

blamed him for being ruled by his mother, and for not asking the lassie in marriage.

In particular Kirsty gave him some plain words that made William afraid of having much to do with women-folk, and made him more content to be a bachelor than he had been since he gave his word to his mother.

So the time went on to two years, and one night William went into the manse and found the minister's lady sorely put about. She had been at the Free Kirk manse, and the new ways there had made her discontented with what had served two or more generations of ministers at the Totum Kirkie.

'Oh, Mr Rafe,' said she, 'I wanted to see you. I have a message for you from Miss Grahame. Her letter contains remarkable intelligence.'

She had been so used to putting copies in the bairn's writing books that she had got into a fine way of framing her talk.

'Have you, indeed?' said William, striving to seem at his ease; and he sat down very sudden on the cat's tail, who punished him well till he thought to rise and release her. When the puss had ceased spitting, and William's face was growing cooler, the lady began—

‘My husband and I have come to the conclusion, though I am not certain that we coincide—’

She stopped and looked at him vague-like.

‘Indeed?’ said William, shifting one foot over the other and back again, so as to look comfortable, though he felt far from it.

‘We were thinking you ought to be made acquainted—’

‘With Miss Isobel’s affairs?’ William interrupted.

‘No, oh dear no! Though you will doubtless be interested to hear that she—’

She paused a while. William’s heart was in his eyes, and he dared not gaze at aught but the magenta roses on the carpet. (Bonnie were they, and had cost a sight of silver in their time). However, the minister’s lady was so long of speaking that he was obliged to raise his face from the floor. ‘You were saying that she—’ said he.

‘No, the observation I wished to make was this—’

‘Yes?’ said William, when she halted again, and he stroked his moustache as if he was none so eager.

‘I think I hear baby crying. You must

excuse me,' said she. And she rose and went from the room, remaining out so long that William was like to eat his fingers with impatience for her return. He was so wishful to hear the news about the lassie that he made ready a half dozen questions to put to the minister's lady.

Yet when she came back, he sat there like a gowk while she talked of her needs. And he promised curtains for the *door*—did any sensible body ever hear the like?—and wee cups that would not quench the thirst, though you drank all day, and such extravagances not known in John Wesley's time, while he waited to hear the news she had gotten of Miss Isobel. And when he had run the kirk into an awful responsibility to meet the expense, the lady took a sleepy turn and yawned more than once.

There was no longer an excuse for him to wait, and he rose, twisting his hat round about on his hands that were damp with nervousness. 'You were mentioning Miss Isobel,' said he, his face matching the roses on the carpet.

'Was I?' said she sleepy-like. 'Oh, yes. But it is a long story. I must tell it you

some other time. Good-night, Mr Rafe. I will order the things to-morrow. Let me see—carpets, curtains, cups, candelabra. I think that was all. Good-night, good-night.'

She bowed him out with English politeness, and when William came to himself he was standing outside the manse in the dark.

CHAPTER XVI

First-footing

William need not have paid so dearly for the news of Miss Isobel that he didn't get; for the morn's morn Kirsty made an errand to the mill, and broached the matter to him with a wonderful running round about the subject. But that day he didn't quarrel with her tongue; for when the talk was sifted he had gotten a few grains of information that made a happy man of him. And though he said nothing, delighted he was to hear that Miss Isobel was coming back to Skyrle. The old lady was dead, and had willed to the lassie the fat doggie and enough silver to make a woman of her to the finish of her days.

'Ou ay,' Kirsty concluded; 'when the Scripture was read on Sabbath that the Psalmist had never seen the seed of the righteous

begging bread, I had the thocht, "Weel, Dawvid, gin you had been langer in the world likely you wadna hae been sae hasty in gi'en your opeenions." Miss Isobel wis i' my mind at the time, puir lambie; and I wis wae tae see her eatin' the bread o' strangers. But noo the Lord has providit. An' glad I am she has nae call tae beg or pray of you or ony ither lad tae mak' a hame tae her!'

Kirsty tossed her head, but William answered very soft and engaging.

'Ay, Kirsty. But, silver or not, Miss Isobel would ne'er have wanted a friend so long as you were a living woman.'

'That wad she no'!' said Kirsty, greatly mollified. And she sat her down again and told William that a wee house nigh the Abbey had been sold by roup; and it was rumoured that Miss Grahame had bought it. And some grand furniture had come by the rail, and was sitting in the station-yard with her name on it.

'And she'll no' be lang ere she's intae the hoose,' said Kirsty; 'for Groves has putten a stovie intae ilka chamber; and there's five hundred o' coal i' the cellar, wi' ither preparations for warming her through the winter.

And there's shutters tae a' the windies, an' the doors newly painted wi' greens that are eneuch to gie the lassie a sair heid. I doot she'll be in by the New Year, William.'

'And do you think so?' he asked. 'It's at New Year I'll be speaking to David to place his eldest lad in the mill. He'll be worth a few shillings the week to me.'

'That will he,' said Kirsty, highly flattered. 'And it's greatly pleased his father will be tae hae word o't. I'm obleeged tae you, William. And I'm no' so sure but Miss Isobel micht dae waur than tae tak' you.'

'No, no, Kirsty,' said William, 'Miss Isobel is a rich lady now. She will look higher than at a Skyrle lad.'

'Toots!' said Kirsty, 'the lassie will look nae higher than her heart. But sae lang as a laddie is content tae be putten i' his mither's poke, he needna be hopin' for a wife, William.'

She gave the lad a throw of her eye that made him forget he was master of the mill, and brought home to him his subjection to his mother's whims and fancies. But yet he raised his head like a man.

'Kirsty,' said he—and there was a patient,

noble look on him then—‘Kirsty, a lad might do worse than to honour his mother.’

The which answer made Kirsty dumb, for she hadn’t credited William with spirit for it.

‘And Miss Isobel? Is she tae want a lad the while you bend to an auld wife’s cranks?’ she said, very severe. His reply had rebuked her, and she wasn’t liking for him to see it.

‘She’ll not want a lad longer than it’s right for her.’ His face turned white the while he said it, and Kirsty fell to greeting. But he stopped her with a question:—‘And is it true that Geordie Mackay is courting Barrie Allister?’

In another minute Kirsty was playing in that key. She wiped her eyes with her apron and told him the whole story. How Barrie was away to the school to be made a lady of, and how Geordie was cutting his sweet-heart to a pattern of his own.

‘But bide a wee,’ Kirsty concluded. ‘A lassie unwed is her ain mistress. When she’s wedded she’s her man’s.’ And for long after she went away William pondered deeply on a woman’s dislike of subjection to the higher powers.

But after that, there was never a day

passed that he didn't make an errand by the wee house nigh the Abbey. He was too bashful to gaze at it; but for all that he saw it growing neat and making ready for her presence, as you will see in the spring-time the trees bursting into leaf ere the coming of the blossoms. But Miss Isobel didn't set foot in Skyrle, and it came on to the last night of the year and none had seen her.

The ground was locked in ice, and on the minister's grave in the Abbey-yard the frost had laid a white wreath beside the holly crown that William Rafe had put there on Christmas Day. For he minded how Miss Isobel had been used to put on that day a wreath of berries round her father's picture in the manse. William's heart had been heavy when he stood beside the grave; but looking up he had had a sight of the stone, and the words, 'I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord,' had heartened him.

He read the lesson of the stone. The skull and the bones, the emblems of our mortality, were crumbling away; but there remained untouched the things invisible, and, above all, love itself. Ay, he could wait till his way

was opened out before him; for though the temporal love passed, the eternal was his, and none could take it away from him.

* * * *

The air was heavy and threatened a storm; and the light from the lattice windows of the Totum Kirkie lay red on newly fallen snow at midnight of the last day in the year. It was the time of the watchnight service; and the folk were gathered in the kirk to make a prayer for the year that was gone, and to see a promise in the year that was to come.

From the High Street came the sound of the lads' voices. They were waiting round about the old kirk for the bell to clang out the hour of midnight. But inside the wee kirkie all was still; and the solemnity of last moments sat on each face.

The organ was playing over the first hymn, when on a sudden William Rafe lost his place and gave a bar three times over, to the great scandal of his mother. But all else excused him the minute afterward. The manse pew had been empty, the nine bairns being bedded and their mother too sleepy to attend the watchnight; but in the playing of the

verse Miss Isobel had walked into her old seat in the pew, and was kneeling there with bent head and the snowflakes white on her hair.

The hymn went very softly after that; for the congregation knew without any words that [the lassie was greeting for the father who had stood in the pulpit at the last watch-night service she had attended in Skyrle.

When the kirk was out every body waited in the porch to give good wishes for the year that was come, and to welcome Miss Isobel back. Widdy Rafe stood apart, not very hearty with the folk, till William came out, when she wished him a good New-Year. But the lad gave her a reply she didn't expect. 'Mother you have the power to make it the best year of my life.'

She stared at him, not crediting what she heard.

'Hoity, toity!' said she, 'and theer's sma' hopes for the year gin you begin't i' this fashion.' Then she showed her anger by taking hold of Elspeth Mackay's arm and starting for home without him. William gazed after her a while and a great sadness struggled with the gladness on his face when

he turned him to speak to Miss Isobel. But she soon had him smiling and content when she told him how happy she was to be back again in Skyrle.

The causeway was slippery with the snow, and William went so far as to offer her his arm, and beg permission to see her to her home. Miss Isobel lingered as they passed the manse gate and looked in to see the garden lapped about with snow, and the trees lifting bare arms in the moonlight with the ruined nests like white blossoms on the bareness of the branches. Then she put her hand on William's arm, and they walked together past the old kirk that had looked on many generations of lads and lasses gathered under its steeple—that had clanged its message of time's flight to many generations of sleepers in the Abbey-yard. It was close upon one o'clock ; but the High Street was full of folk shouting and making merry with whisky ; and William could scarce hear Miss Isobel telling him she had been but a few hours in Skyrle ; and Kirsty was going to live with her till her own maid came with the doggies the next week.

The walk was too short for him, and when

they came to the wee house she gave him the key and bade him ope the door, and bring good luck to her home. William knew well that in Skyrle the first foot that enters a house at the New-Year should take a gift with it. But what with his bashfulness and his happy heart, he forgot the custom, and was in the house ere he thought of it. Then he twisted him round in haste—

‘Lassie, I’m no’ like to bring you guid luck, for I hae come withoot a gift, and the ane thing I wad fain offer you is—’

And what more he would have said I cannot tell, for at that very minute Kirsty hasted in, all in a bustle to ‘firstfit’ Miss Isobel. She had brought with her a red herring, awful bonnie, with a green riband at his head and a pink one at its tail.

Miss Isobel was like to roar and laugh when she had a sight of it, but she steadied her face the while she praised it greatly. And well she might, for all in Skyrle know that a red herring at the New-Year will bring good luck to any house.

CHAPTER XVII

Widdy Rafe

It was in vain that Kirsty M'Naughten schemed to get the news that a marriage was fixed between Miss Isobel and William Rafe. The New-Year was well in, and 'the spring came slowly up the way'; and the flowers on the cliff-sides were all a-blossom. The rooks built their nests in the manse elms; and the jackdaws were busy among the chimneys and in the Abbey, and still there was no talk of betrothal. The only good luck the herring seemed to have brought Miss Isobel wasn't the luck Kirsty had hoped for, but a better thing—'A heart at leisure from itself.'

It was wonderful to see the winsome ways of the lassie as she went in and out among the kirk members, the friend of all, as well as the servant of all, spending her life, as it

seemed, in making others happy. The years she had been in the south had seen a change on her; and the blithe lassie was deepening down into a thoughtful woman. But although she was steadier-like, her eyes were aye glinting; and she couldn't keep the sunshine from her hair that was tossed and tumbled as it had been when she came first to Skyrle a young lassie.

She had learned to walk quietly along the streets; but her feet went as if they kept time to some music that none heard beside herself; and always she had the look of the day when she came dancing down between the birks in Fyston Den, with the flowers in her hair and a song on her lips.

It was pretty to see her in the Abbey talking with the old men; or walking by the shore with half-a-dozen bairns hanging to her skirts; or in the poor's house singing to the old bodies there. And wherever she went the clouds seemed to lighten and the day to break. She had settled in the wee house nigh the Abbey; and she had for company a spinster body, and the parrot, and the doggie Skye, and the fat doggie that had been willed to her. But she wasn't content

with all these, and the house was always full of folk.

They were queer bodies that she drew about her; for whenever she heard of any old wife that was more than ordinary awkward, or that was ailing, or poor, or lonesome, she would have her to the house and keep her a week or two beside her to hearten the poor creature. And it was the same with the bairns; and many a one has started on a happier life from the door of Miss Isobel's home.

Eh, deary! What a name she got in the town and what a sight of good she did with the old lady's silver!

There were some that thought the lassie almost perfect; but she was not that, for she had a fine temper of her own as was seen by the way she boxed the ears of a fisher lad that she caught ill-using the fat doggie. And I mind of her shaming a half-dozen men that were making sport of a drunken woman till there was none of them that would look her in the face afterward. Ay, she had a temper, but yet Kirsty had it to say it was a terrible want of spirit in Miss Isobel that she did not resent William's silence, but bore herself

cheerful and brave before him. If she had had a proper spirit in her she would surely have wept, as many a woman has done before her, till she brought him to the point of offering marriage. But Kirsty dared not say this before the lassie, who wouldn't allow a word of William in her presence.

By this time the whole kirk knew that the two were meant the one for the other, and there was a great controversy as to William's behaviour. He couldn't do enough for the lassie, yet he made no haste to be affianced; and Miss Isobel treated him with the same frankness she had given him at the first. It was a weary business for the kirk waiting for William to propose marriage; but it led the talk from the overful manse, and maybe did good in that way. And through it all Widdy Rafe set her mouth and wouldn't open it on the subject; though Kirsty wasted a long hour learning a new knitting pattern from the widdy in order to surprise her into giving her views on William's marriage.

She was getting on in years, was the widdy; but if she felt her physical powers going from her she held all the more to those that were left. She had aye had her

way in life, and she would have it to the end; and as her body grew frailer, her will waxed stronger, until all the softness and tenderness of a mother went from her.

I doubt, seeing the fine lassie Miss Isobel had grown—and maybe thinking of the silver she had gotten—her mind misgave her that she hadn't done right in crossing William's love; but yet she was too proud to yield her will to make him happy. And if ever his sad face pled for him, she smote him with her sarcasm. And she would call to mind the lassie's free ways, and the bawbees she spent on flowers to dead folk that couldn't see nor feel them, and such extravagances; and would harden her heart, saying she wasn't the wife for William.

And so the weeks slipped by, and a great sickness visited Skyrle. It began first in the mills, and then it spread to the schools, and soon there was scarce a house where one wasn't lying sick or dead. Meeting the folk in the streets, you would have thought from the white faces and the black gowns that Skyrle was a town of the dead that summer. The doctors had their hands full, and our doctor in particular was among the sick

night and day. It was to him Miss Isobel went begging that she might help with his patients. And she took the sick into her house, and many a bairn she nursed back to health.

But this did not content her ; and wherever there was a case needing special care she would offer herself, till at the last the doctors counted her as one of themselves, and would put her in charge of the worst of the patients. I blame the doctors for this, for it wasn't likely a lassie could bear up like strong men. But, however, she kept up with the best of them till the sickness had well-nigh left the town.

Her face had been almost the only cheery face to be seen on the streets that time ; but towards August she grew whiter and whiter, and at last was forced to give up. The sickness had taken her, and she lay nigh to death in the house where she had rescued so many from the disease.

On the Sabbath after she was laid down, a great sadness was over the town ; but especially in the hearts of the kirk members, who best knew and most loved her. William Rafe, with some of the choir, went to sing

for her after the kirk was out; but she couldn't notice them, and he went home with his heart bursting with the distress he couldn't tell to anybody.

His mother heard him climb the stair and go to his room in the attic, but she didn't cry him in to her. Her heart was sore inside her, and she was fighting a great battle with love and pride and jealousy. She couldn't bear to see the trouble of her lad, and to know that she had no part for his comfort; and it irked her to see that William didn't turn to her for sympathy. Besides, her conscience was not easy, for it told her that deep down in her heart, syne ever Miss Isobel had sickened, had been the wish that the lassie would die and end the discord between herself and her son. She hadn't dared pray in the kirk with the members uniting for the lassie's life, but had been feared because her ill wish had been granted her. And as she thought of it now, she would have given up her position and her house, if only that might make the lassie recover.

She sat very straight in her chair—a noble-looking old body with her fine strong face and her white mutch, and black silk gown

with the white kerchief crossed on her bosom. Ay, a noble-like old lady she seemed; but in all Skyrle that night there wasn't a more miserable woman than Widdy Rafe. She had sought her own will, and she had gotten it; but all the sweetness had been taken from it. The lassie was like to die, and her son would be her son all his life. She had willed to keep him hers; but she knew that she had lost him, and more than if he had married with the lassie.

There's nothing kills love sooner than strife. The widdy had striven for her own way till she had been like to hate the son she had wronged. And although William showed his mother a son's respect, he couldn't but feel that she had thwarted his life to no good end. Syne the New Year, when he had first-footed Miss Isobel, he had prayed his mother to give her consent to the marriage: but he could easier move the Table Rock than the old body, and he had been forced to bide without speaking to the lassie. And the silence she had made him keep had closed his mouth to her that was his mother. She had let loose an ill bird, and it had come home to roost on her own head.

By-and-by her face waked up from its thoughts, and she set herself to listen to a strange sound in the house. Ay, surely it came from the attic-room.

The widdy rose trembling from her chair, but her limbs were fine and steady when she passed to her son's room. She lifted the sneck and would have gone into the room but for the sight she saw.

William was set by the table with his face on his hands, and all the cry that went from him was the deep groaning of a man's anguish.

He did not move to speak to his mother, likely he didn't hear her, but it cut to her heart that he should not notice her. Her old face was all of a quiver, and she moved back and softly went down the stairs and to her chamber.

The struggle of a soul with itself is not a sight for human eyes to gaze on. Widdy Rafe had never been so strong a woman as in that hour that she spent in battle against herself, but I cannot lift the veil from that scene.

When it was over, she reached down her bonnet and her shawl, and put on her gloves,

and with never a word to William she went from the house in the gloaming of the Sabbath. It was drawing on to the night, and as she walked through the streets the shadows were all round her, hiding her from the folk that would have marvelled at her white face and strong, determined manner. So she came to the wee house nigh the Abbey, and found the door open, and went in with ne'er a creature to stop her.

The doggie Skye came forward with his ears and tail hanging, and went before her up to the chamber where Miss Isobel was lying.

Kirsty and Elspeth Mackay and Jean Wishart were in the room, and Jean looked up and motioned silence, but none spoke to the widdy. With steady feet she stepped to the lassie's side and bowed to reach her hand.

Then Kirsty rose and touched the widdy softly. 'Na, na, dinna fash her,' said she. 'She's i' the vera airticle o' deith, puir lambie. She hasna spoken for hooers. She's wearin' awa' as peacefu' as a bairn. You maun lat her gae i' peace.'

Widdy Rafe turned herself round and set

Kirsty aside; then she drew herself up very straight, and spake as if she addressed the lassie lying before her.

‘Lassie,’ said she, ‘I hae dune you a great wrang, and wad fain hae your pardon. It’s maybe too late for that the noo; but I wad say i’ the sicht o’ a present that I’m no’ meet tae be a kirk member. I hae been prood an’ wilfu—I hae regarded enmity i’ my heart, an’ I hae cherished ill thochts tae the innocent lamb that did me nae wrang. I hae stood i’ the way o’ her happiness, an’ I hae come atween her an’ my lad. I hae e’en wushed for her deith; an’ for a’ these things I wad humble mysel’, and may the A’michty forgive. Amen.’

The words were so unexpected, and it was such an awful sight to see the proud old body brought low, that Elspeth and Jean turned away. But Kirsty put her apron over her head and sobbed aloud. In the moment that followed after, it was like a voice from the dead to hear Miss Isobel cry with a frail and trembling speech,

‘Is that Mrs Rafe? I want her to kiss me. And I must send my love to William.’

Even now the widdy cannot tell how her

limbs bore her home. But, however, she was all of a tremble when she stood beside William again, and her poor old hands tottered sadly when she laid them on his head.

'Laddie,' said she, 'I bring you great news. The lassie is tae live. She bade me give you her luve. An', William, you maun gae tae her, an' tak your mither's luve tae her dochter.'

* * * * *

It is not the fashion in Skyrle to make much of Christmas time; but on Christmas Eve that year the Totum Kirkie was lighted late while the members made it bonnie with flowers to please her who had always gathered the blossoms about her. I'm not saying the decorations were so grand as at the English chapel up the hill; but sure I am that the braw posies there didn't mean more than each leaf and each berry that was put for Miss Isobel's marriage. It was a bonnie kirk when all was finished, and David had gotten the place swept and ready for the marriage that was to be early the Christmas morn.

The stained glass window was framed with Christmas roses; and above the pulpit Geordie Mackay had hung a laurel wreath.

'Maybe the lassie's thochts will turn to her father's death i' the pulpit,' said he, 'an' the croon will lead her higher tae his victory.'

And a bonnie sight it was when Miss Isobel—looking like a white rose after her illness—came up the aisle and stood before the minister where she and Jean had stood to have Nancy Mulholland's bairn named; and William took his place beside her, too proud and happy to be bashful at his position. Geordie Mackay was best man, and Kirsty would put herself beside Miss Isobel, though the most of the lassie's grand friends were there to see her wedded.

All things were done in the English fashion which makes a sore discipline of being wedded; and there were many there that pitied William Rafe for the catechism he went through that day. But when the minister looked up from his book, saying: 'Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?' there was silence a while in the kirk, for none had counted on the question being asked.

It was like to have made an awkward thing of the marriage: but in the silence Widdy Rafe took a step forward and lifted her head in her old manner: 'I dae that,' said she.

THE END

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